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# THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR

Volume 28 *Summer, 1959* Number 3

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# Editorial

THIS ISSUE OF THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR is devoted to contemporary poetry—articles about it and examples of it. The articles and reviews have been prepared by a particularly able group of critics, many of whom write poetry. The selected poems presented here have been chosen from recent and heretofore unpublished work of ten distinguished poets; they constitute, we believe, a fair segment of some of the best writing being done in this country. In addition, we present the poems chosen for awards from the more than two thousand submissions to our first poetry contest. These poems come from three as yet little-known writers who show exceptional skill and promise.

In publishing this issue of THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR we wish to acknowledge the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Academy of American Poets—an organization which, under dedicated and capable leadership, has encouraged and fostered American poets and poetry since 1934. The Academy is the SCHOLAR's junior by only two years, and it is our fond hope that we will be able to observe its fiftieth anniversary. The fact that this birthday will occur in 1984 will discourage neither of us.

Regular readers of the SCHOLAR will remember other "special issues" of the magazine—issues conceived, planned and developed around a central theme: "The Human Situation Today" (Winter, 1955-56), "New Departures and Directions" (Autumn, 1956), "Faiths for a Complex World" (Autumn, 1957). Although the response to these thematic issues has been enthusiastic, we have approached each of them with the same misgiving: Would we, in the act of seeking and organizing material around a central theme, create something more static than the desired mirage of the whole, and inadvertently imply that this was all there was to know about a given subject and all our readers needed to know—a pitfall into which many "big" and "little" magazines have stumbled and one which, apparently, is so comfortably snug and dark that no one



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wishes to emerge. The fact that so many of their readers have descended the downgrade with no complaint may well be explained by the offer that disguises the trap: "Be well informed easily and quickly."

No reader will come away from this issue with a complete picture of American poetry today. In an attempt to avoid unified conclusions, we have not suggested to any author what he should say or how he should say it. We hope that the Summer issue will please the "professionals" of poetry, even though it was not planned for them. It has been assembled for the laymen—those intelligent SCHOLAR readers who are well informed on foreign policy, concerned with economic imbalance, intrigued with the sociological implications of advertising—those good men and true who approach a double-crostic with fervor but to whom it would never occur to lift the first, much less the seventh, veil of a poem. All the ideas that interest these readers can be found somewhere in the poems we present here. The articles will aid the search but not guarantee its success.

If we were to dedicate this issue of THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR, it would be to four of the Muses—Calliope, Euterpe, Erato and Polyhymnia—lovely, dismayed and waiting to be reclaimed by some ardent audience of the future. For in spite of the enticing reputation of the sisters of poetry, ranging from hoyden to nice girl, from zealot to dilettante, they continue to be wallflowers at any Saturday night function sponsored by the American reader.

This, then, is an attempt to assemble a new audience: a few writers, critics and teachers of poetry and the many AMERICAN SCHOLAR readers who are none of these. We honor the poet; we value the medium he has chosen through which to communicate his own knowledge and sense of caring. But we believe that his readers—curious, informed, alert, ready to grapple with the complexities of thought and method the poet employs—will determine whether he is a straw man or an active participant in the general and particular affairs of his time. For this reason we bring you an issue on contemporary poetry, and we agree with H. M. Tomlinson that "the reader who is illuminated is, in a real sense, the poem."

BETSY SAUNDERS



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# Poets, Critics and Readers

RANDALL JARRELL

PEOPLE OFTEN ASK ME, "Is there any poet who makes his living writing poetry?" and I have to say, "No." The public has an unusual relationship to the poet: it doesn't even know that he is there. Our public is a rich and generous one; if it knew that the poet was there, it would pay him for being there. As it is, poets make their living in many ways: by being obstetricians, like William Carlos Williams; or directors of Faber and Faber, like T. S. Eliot; or vice-presidents of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, like Wallace Stevens. But most poets, nowadays, make their living by teaching. Kepler said, "God gives every animal a way to make its living, and He has given the astronomer astrology"; and now, after so many centuries, He has given us poets students. But what He gives with one hand He takes away with the other: He has taken away our readers.

Yet the poet can't help looking at what he has left, his students, with gratitude. His job may be an impossible one—there are three impossible tasks, said Freud: to teach, to govern and to cure—but what is there so grateful as impossibility? and what is there better to teach, more nearly impossible to teach, than poems and stories? As Lord Macaulay says: "For how can man live better/ Than facing fearful odds/ For the poems of his fathers—"

I seem to have remembered it a little wrong, but it's a natural error. And, today, when we get people to read poems—to read very much of anything—naturally and joyfully, to read it not as an unnatural rightness but as a natural error: what people always

✪ RANDALL JARRELL is the author of several books of poetry, a book of literary criticism and a novel. During 1957-58, he was Poetry Consultant at the Library of Congress, after which he returned to the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina, where he teaches English.



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have done, always will do—we do it against fearful odds. I can't imagine a better way for the poet to make his living. I certainly can't imagine his making his living by writing poems—I'm not *that* imaginative. I'm used to things as they are.

But there is a passage in Wordsworth that I read, always, with a rueful smile. He is answering the question, *Why write in verse?* He gives several reasons. His final reason, he writes, "is all that is *necessary* to say upon this subject." Here it is, all that it is *necessary* to say upon this subject: "Few persons will deny, that of two descriptions, either of passions, manners, or characters, each of them equally well executed, the one in prose and the other in verse, the verse will be read a hundred times where the prose is read once."

One sees sometimes, carved on geology buildings: *O Earth, what changes thou hast seen!* When a poet finishes reading this passage from Wordsworth, he thinks in miserable awe: *O Earth, what changes thou hast seen!* Only a hundred and fifty years ago, a hundred, *this* is what people were like. Nowadays, of course, the prose will be read a thousand times where the verse is read once. And this seems to everybody only natural; the situation Wordsworth describes seems unnatural, improbable, almost impossible. To most of us verse, any verse, is so uncongenial, so exhaustively artificial, that I have often thought that a man could make his fortune by entirely eliminating from our culture verse of any kind: in the end there would *be* no more poems, only prose translations of them. This man could begin by publishing his Revised Standard Version of *Mother Goose*: without rhyme, meter or other harmful adulterants; with no word of anything but honest American prose, prose that cats and dogs can read.

A friend of mine once took a famous Italian scholar on a tour of New Haven. She specialized in objects of art and virtue—samplers, figureheads, paintings of women under willows, statues of General Washington—but no matter what she showed him, the man would only wave his hand in the air and exclaim: *Ridickalus!* And shouldn't we feel so about things like *Mother Goose*?

> Early to bed and early to rise
> Makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.



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Ridickalus! Why say it like a rocking horse? why make it jingle so? and *wise*—who wants to be wise?

> Which sibling is the well-adjusted sibling?
> *The one that gets its sleep.*

That is the way the modern *Mother Goose* will put it. I don't expect the modern *Mother Goose* to be especially popular with little children, who have not yet learned not to like poetry; but it is the parents who buy the book.

Isn't writing verse a dying art, anyway, like blacksmithing or buggymaking? Well, not exactly: poets are making as many buggies as ever—good buggies, fine buggies—they just can't get anybody much to ride in them. As for blacksmithing: I read the other day that there are twice as many blacksmith shops in the United States as there are bookstores. Something has gone wrong with that comparison too. No, I'm doing what poets do, complaining; and if I exaggerate a little when I complain, why that's only human—surely you want me to exaggerate a little, in my misery. Goethe says, when he is talking about slum children: "No person ever looks miserable who feels that he has the right to make a demand on you." This right is not anything that anyone can confer upon himself; it is the public, society, all of us, that confer this right. If the poet looks miserable, it is because we have made him feel that he no longer has the right to make a demand on us. It is no longer a question of what he wants, or of what he ought to be given—he takes what he gets, and complains about getting it, and he hears the echo of his complaint, and then the silence settles around him, a little darker, a little deeper.

What does he want? To be read. Read by whom? critics? men wise enough to tell him, when they have read the poem, what it is and ought to be, what its readers feel and ought to feel? Well, no. A writer cannot learn about his readers from his critics: they are different races. The critic, unless he is one in a thousand, reads to criticize; the reader reads to read.

Freud talks of the "free-floating" or "evenly-hovering" attention with which the analyst must listen to the patient. Concentra-



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tion, note-taking, listening with a set—a set of pigeonholes—makes it difficult or impossible for the analyst's Unconscious to respond to the patient's; takes away from the analyst the possibility of learning from the patient what the analyst doesn't already know; takes away from him all those random guesses or intuitions or inspirations which come out of nowhere—and come, too, out of the truth of the patient's being. But this is quite as true of critics and the poems that are *their* patients: when one reads as a linguist, a scholar, a New or Old or High or Low critic, when one reads the poem *as a means to an end,* one is no longer a pure reader but an applied one. The true reader "listens like a three years' child:/ The Mariner hath his will." Later on he may write like a sixty-three-year-old sage, but he knows that in the beginning, unless ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of art. Hofmannsthal says, with awful finality: "The world has lost its innocence, and without innocence no one creates or enjoys a work of art"; but elsewhere he says more hopefully, with entire and not with partial truth, that each of us lives in an innocence of his own which he never entirely loses.

Is there a public for poetry that is still, in this sense of the word, innocent? Of course, there are several publics for poetry—small, benighted, eccentric publics—just as there are publics for postage stamps and cobblers' benches; but this is such a disastrous change from the days of *Childe Harold* and *In Memoriam* and *Hiawatha,* when the public for poetry was, simply, the reading public, that you can see why poets feel the miserable astonishment that they feel. The better-known poets feel it more than the lesser-known, who—poor things—lie under the table grateful for crumbs, pats, kicks, anything at all that will let them be sure they really exist, and are not just a dream someone has stopped dreaming. A poet like Auden says that nobody reads him except poets and young men in cafeterias—his description of the young men is too repellent for me to repeat it to you.

Literally, Auden is wrong: we read Auden, this is no cafeteria; but, figuratively, Auden is right—the poet's public's gone. Freder-



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ick the Great translated Voltaire, and trembled as the poet read the translation; Elizabeth—Elizabeth the First—and Henry the Eighth and Richard the Lion-hearted wrote good poems and read better; and I cannot resist quoting to you three or four sentences from Frans Bengtsson's novel *The Long Ships*, to show you what things were like at the court of Harald Bluetooth, King of Denmark in the year 1000. A man gets up from a banquet table: "His name was Björn Asbrandsson, and he was a famous warrior, besides being a great poet to boot. . . . Although he was somewhat drunk, he managed to improvise some highly skilful verses in King Harald's honor in a meter known as *töglag*. This was the latest and most difficult verse-form that the Icelandic poets had invented, and indeed the poem was so artfully contrived that little could be understood of its content. Everybody, however, listened with an appearance of understanding, for any man who could not understand poetry would be regarded as a poor specimen of a warrior; and King Harald praised the poet and gave him a gold ring."

Auden is a descendant of just such poets as this one; but if Auden, when he next visits the University of your state, makes up an incomprehensible poem, in a difficult new meter, in honor of the President of the University, will all its football players pretend they understand the poem, so as not to be thought poor specimens of football players? and will the President give Auden a gold ring?

In the days when his readers couldn't read, the poet judged his public by his public: the gold ring or the scowl the king gave him was as concrete as the labored, triumphant faces of his hearers. But nowadays King Harald and his warriors are represented by a reviewer, next year, in the New York *Times*; a critic, nine years later, in the *Sewanee Review*. "Ah, better to sing my songs to a wolf pack on the Seeonee than to a professor on the *Sewanee*!" the poet blurts, baring his teeth; but then—what choice has he?—he lets the Reality Principle do its worst, and projects or extends or extrapolates a critic or two, a dozen reviewers, into the Public; into Posterity. Critics, alas, are the medium through which the poet darkly senses his public. Nor is it altogether different for the public: Harald and



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his vikings, lonely in their split-levels, do not even remember the days when, as they listened, they could look into one another's faces and know without looking what they would find there. Now they too look into the *Times*; wish that they could replace that scowl with a gold ring, that gold ring with a scowl; reconstruct from the exclamations on dust jackets, quotations in advertisements, the fierce smiles on the faces of the warriors.

So if we are to talk about the poet and his poems and his public, what each is to the others, we must spend much of our time—too much of our time—talking about his critics. Criticism is necessary, I suppose; I know. Yet criticism, to the poet, is no necessity, but a luxury he can ill afford. Conrad cried to his wife: "I don't want criticism, I want praise!" And it is praise, blame, tears, laughter, that writers want; when Columbus comes home he needs to be cheered for finding a new way to India, not interned while the officials argue about whether it is Asia, Africa or Antarctica that he has discovered. Really, of course, it's America—and if they agreed about it this would be helpful to Columbus; he could say to himself, in awe: "So it was America I discovered!" But how seldom the critics do agree! A gray writer seems black to his white critics, white to black critics: the same poem will seem incomprehensible modernistic nonsense to Robert Hillyer or J. Donald Adams, and a sober, old-fashioned, versified essay to the critics of some little magazine of advanced tastes. Ordinary human feeling, the most natural tenderness, will seem to many critics and readers rank sentimentality, just as a kind of nauseated brutality (in which the writer's main response to the world is simply to vomit) will seem to many critics and readers the inescapable truth. We live in a time in which Hofmannsthal's "Good taste is the ability continuously to counteract exaggeration" will seem to most readers as false as it seems tame. "Each epoch has its own sentimentality," Hofmannsthal goes on, "its specific way of overemphasizing strata of emotion. The sentimentality of the present is egotistic and unloving; it exaggerates not the feeling of love but that of the self."

Everyone speaks of the "negative capability" of the artist, of his



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ability to lose what self he has in the many selves, the great self of the world. Such a quality is, surely, the first that a critic should have; yet who speaks of the negative capability of the critic? how often are we able to observe it? The commonest response to the self of a work of art is the critic's assertion that he too has a self. What he writes proves it. I once saw, in an essay by a psychoanalyst, the phrase *the artist and his competitor, the critic.* Where got he that truth? Out of an analysand's mouth? I do not know; but that it is an important and neglected truth I do know. All mediators become competitors: the exceptions to this rule redeem their kind.

Critics disagree about almost every quality of a writer's work; and when some agree about a quality, they disagree about whether it is to be praised or blamed, nurtured or rooted out. After enough criticism the writer is covered with lipstick and bruises, and the two are surprisingly evenly distributed. There is *nothing* so plain about a writer's books, to some critics, that its opposite isn't plain to others. Kafka is original? Not at all, according to Edmund Wilson. A fine critic of poetry, Ezra Pound, writes: "In [the writer So-and-So] you have an embroidery of language, a talk *about* the matter, not presentation; you have grace, richness of language, etc., as much as you like, but you have nothing that isn't replaceable by something else, no ornament that wouldn't have done just as well in some other connection, or that for which some other figure of rhetoric or fancy couldn't have served, or which couldn't have been distilled from literary antecedents." About whom is Pound speaking? About Shakespeare. Anyone who has read at all widely has come across thousands of such judgments, and it is easy for him to sympathize with the artist when the artist murmurs, "We wish to learn from our critics, but it is hard for us even to recover from them. A fool's reproach has an edge like a razor, and his brother's praise is small consolation. Critics are like bees: one sting lasts longer than a dozen jars of honey."

The best thing ever said about criticism—I am not, now, speaking as a critic—was said, as is often the case, by Goethe: "Against



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criticism we can neither protect nor defend ourselves; we must act in despite of it, and gradually it resigns itself to this." The great Goethe suffered just as we little creatures do, and he spoke about it, as we don't, in imperishable sentences: "All great excellence in life or art, at its first recognition, brings with it a certain pain arising from the strongly felt inferiority of the spectator; only at a later period, when if we take it into our own culture, and appropriate as much of it as our capacities allow, do we learn to love and esteem it. Mediocrity, on the other hand, may often give us unqualified pleasure; it does not disturb our self-satisfaction, but rather encourages us with the thought that we are as good as another. . . . Properly speaking, we learn only from those books we cannot judge. The author of a book that I am competent to criticize would have to learn from me." Goethe says over and over: "Nothing is more terrible than ignorance in action. . . . It is a terrible thing when fools thrive at the expense of a superior man." You and I will agree—and then we will have to decide whether we're being thriven at the expense of, or thriving. Goethe says in firm doggerel: "However clear and simple be it/ Finder and doer alone may see it." No, Goethe didn't have too much use for critics, since he thought that critics weren't of too much use.

And why am I quoting all this to you? have critics hurt me so that I want to pull down the temple upon their heads, even if I too perish in the ruins?—for I too am a critic. No, it's not that; critics have done their best for me, and their best has been, perhaps, only too good; when I myself criticize, I am willing for you to believe what I say; but I am trying to explain why it is that critics are of so little use to writers, why it is that they are such a poor guide to the opinions of the next age—and I am explaining in an age which has an unprecedented respect for, trust in, criticism.

All of us have read pieces of criticism, by men like Eliot, Auerbach, Blackmur, Mann, Pritchett, Pound, Trilling, Wilson, Empson, which seem worthy both of delighted respect and cautious trust. All of us have read criticism in which the critic takes it for granted that what he writes about comes first, and what he writes comes second—takes it for granted that he is writing as a reader to



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other readers, to be of use to them; criticism in which the critic works, as far as he is able, in the spirit of Wordsworth's "I have endeavored to look steadily at my subject." All of us have some favorite, exceptional critic who might say, with substantial truth, that he has not set up rigid standards to which a true work of art must conform, but that he has tried instead to let the many true works of art—his experience of them—set up the general expectations to which his criticism of art conforms; that he has tried never to see a work of art as mere raw material for criticism, data for generalization; that he has tried never to forget the difference between creating a work of art and criticizing a work of art; and that he has tried, always, to remember what Proust meant when he said, about writers like Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, Flaubert, the great creators called "romantics": "The classics have no better commentators than the 'romantics.' The romantics are the only people who really know how to read the classics, because they read them as they were written, that is to say, 'romantically' and because if one would read a poet or a prose writer properly one must be, not a scholar, but a poet or a prose writer." It might be put a little differently: if one would read a poet or a prose writer properly one must be, not a scholar or a poet or a prose writer, but a reader: someone who reads books as they were written, that is to say, "romantically." Proust's grandmother was not a poet or a prose writer, but she read Madame de Sévigné properly. To be, as she was, a reader, is a lofty and no longer common fate.

The best poetry critic of our time, T. S. Eliot, has said about his criticism: "I see that I wrote best about poets whose work had influenced my own, and with whose poetry I had become thoroughly familiar, long before I desired to write about them, or had found the occasion to do so. . . . The best of my literary criticism . . . is a by-product of my private poetry-workshop." But perhaps something of this sort is always true: perhaps true criticism is something, like sincerity or magnanimity, that cannot be aimed at, attained, directly; that must always be, in some sense, a by-product, whether of writing or reading, of a private poetry-workshop or a private reading-room.



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We all realize that writers are inspired, but helpless and fallible beings, who know not what they write; readers, we know from personal experience, are less inspired but no less helpless and fallible beings, who half the time don't know what they're reading. Now, a critic is half writer, half reader: just as the vices of men and horses met in centaurs, the weaknesses of readers and writers meet in critics. A good critic—we cannot help seeing, when we look back at any other age—is a much rarer thing than a good poet or a good novelist. Unless you are one critic in a hundred thousand, the future will quote you only as an example of the normal error of the past, what everybody was foolish enough to believe then. Critics are discarded like calendars; yet, for their year, with what trust the world regards them!

Art is long, and critics are the insects of a day. But, while he survives, it is the work of art he criticizes which is the critic's muse, or daemon, or guardian angel: it is a delight to the critic to think that sometimes, in moments of particular good fortune, some poem by Rilke or Yeats or Wordsworth has hovered above him, whispering what to say about it in his ear. And, in the moments of rash ambition which can come even to such humble—rightly humble—things as critics, the critic can imagine some reader, in the midst of his pleasure at a poem the critic has guided him to, being willing to think of some paragraph of the critic's work in terms of a sentence of Goethe's: "There is a sensitive empiricism that ultimately identifies itself with the object and thereby becomes genuine theory."

In other moments the critic can imagine the reader's thinking of him in terms of a paragraph that Proust once wrote. That miraculous writer and great critic, distressed at someone's having referred to Sainte-Beuve as one of the "great guides," exclaimed: "Surely no one ever failed so completely as did he in performing the functions of a guide? The greater part of his *Lundis* are devoted to fourth-rate writers, and whenever, by chance, he does bring himself to speak of somebody really important, of Flaubert, for instance, or Baudelaire, he immediately atones for what grudging praise he may have accorded him by letting it be understood that he writes as he does about them simply because he wants to



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please men who are his personal friends. . . . As to Stendhal, the novelist, the Stendhal of 'La Chartreuse,' our 'guide' laughs out of court the idea that such a person ever existed, and merely sees in all the talk about him the disastrous effects of an attempt (foredoomed to failure) to foist Stendhal on the public as a novelist. . . . It would be fun, had I not less important things to do, to 'brush in' (as Monsieur Cuvillier Fleury would have said), in the manner of Sainte-Beuve, a 'picture of French literature in the nineteenth century,' in such a way that not a single great name would appear and men would be promoted to the position of outstanding authors whose books today have been completely forgotten."

A portion of any critic, as he reads these sentences, turns white; and if another portion whispers, "Ah, but *you* needn't be afraid; certainly *you're* not as bad a critic as Sainte-Beuve," it is not a sentence to bring the color back into his cheeks, unless he blushes easily.

Wordsworth said, as Proust said after him, that "every writer, in so far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed: so is it, so will it continue to be." But *taste*, he goes on to say, is a vicious and deluding word. (And surely he is right; surely we should use, instead, a phrase like *imaginative judgment*.) Using such a word as *taste* helps to make us believe that there is some passive faculty that responds to the new work of art, registering the work's success or failure; but actually the new work must call forth in us an active power analagous to that which created it—the reader "cannot proceed in quiescence, he cannot be carried like a dead weight," he must "exert himself" to feel, to sympathize and to understand. "*There*," as Wordsworth says, "lies the true difficulty." He is right: *there* lies the difficulty for us, whether we are critics or readers; so is it, so will it continue to be.

You may say, "Of course this is true of great and original talents, but how does it apply to the trivial, immature and eccentric writers with whom our age, like any other, is infested?" It applies only in this way: some of these trivial, immature and eccentric writers *are* our great and original talents. The readers of Words-



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worth's age said, "Of course what he says is true of great and original talents, but it is absurd when applied to a trivial and eccentric creature like Wordsworth"; and the critics of Wordsworth's age, applying the standards of the age more clearly, forcibly and self-consciously, could condemn him with a more drastic severity. The readers read to read, the critics read to judge—both were wrong, but the critics were more impressively and rigorously and disastrously wrong, since they confirmed most readers in their dislike of Wordsworth and scared most of the others out of their liking.

We all see that the writer cannot afford to listen to critics when they are wrong—though how is he, how are we, to know when they are wrong? Can he afford to listen to them when they are right? —though how is he, how are we, to know when they are right? and right for this age or right for the next? The writer cannot afford to question his own essential nature—must have, as Marianne Moore says, "the courage of his peculiarities." But often it is this very nature, these very peculiarities—originality always seems peculiarity, to begin with—that critics condemn. There must be about the writer a certain spontaneity or naïveté or somnambulistic rightness: he must, in some sense, move unquestioning in the midst of his world—at his question all will disappear.

And if it is slighter things, alterable things which the critics condemn, should the poet give in, alter them, and win his critics' surprised approval? "No," Wordsworth says; "where the understanding of an author is not convinced, or his feelings altered, this cannot be done without great injury to himself: for his own feelings are his stay and support, and, if he set them aside in this one instance, he may be induced to repeat this act till his mind shall lose all confidence in itself, and become utterly debilitated. To this it may be added, that the critic ought never to forget that he is himself exposed to the same errors as the Poet." Let me repeat this: we ought never to forget that the critic is himself exposed to the same errors as the poet. We all know this—yet, in a deeper sense, we don't know it. We all realize that the poet's beliefs are, first of all, *his*: our books show how his epoch, his childhood, his mistresses and his Unconscious produced the beliefs; we know, now, the "real"



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reasons for his believing what he believed. Why do we not realize what is equally true (and equally false)?—that the critic's beliefs are, first of all, *his*; that we can write books showing how his epoch, his childhood, his mistresses and his Unconscious produced the beliefs; that we can know, now, the "real" reasons for his believing what he believed. The work of criticism is rooted in the Unconscious of the critic just as the poem is rooted in the Unconscious of the poet. I have had the pleasure and advantage of knowing many poets, many critics, and I have not found one less deeply neurotic than the other.

When the critic is also an artist—a T. S. Eliot—we find it easier to remember all this, and to distrust him; but when the critic is an Irving Babbitt—that is to say, a man who, tenanted by all nine of the muses, still couldn't create a couplet—we tend to think of his beliefs as somehow more objective. "Surely," we feel, "a man with so little imagination couldn't be making up something—couldn't be *inspired*." We are wrong. Criticism is the poetry of prosaic natures (and even, in our time, of some poetic ones); there is a divinity that inspires the most sheeplike of scholars, the most tabular of critics, so that the man too dull to understand *Evangeline* still can be possessed by some theory about *Evangeline*, a theory as just to his own being as it is unjust to *Evangeline*'s. The man is entitled to his inspiration; and yet . . . if only he would leave out *Evangeline*! If only he could secede from Literature, and set up some metaliterary kingdom of his own.

The poet *needs* to be deluded about his poems—for who can be sure that it is delusion? In his strongest hours the public hardly exists for the writer: he does what he ought to do, has to do, and if afterwards some Public wishes to come and crown him with laurel crowns, well, let it! if critics wish to tell people all that he isn't, well, let them—he knows what he is. But at night when he can't get to sleep it seems to him that it is what he is, his own particular personal quality, that he is being disliked for. It is this that the future will like him for, if it likes him for anything; but will it like him for anything? The poet's hope is in posterity, but it is a pale hope; and now that posterity itself has become a pale hope. . . .



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The writer—I am still talking about the writer-not-yet-able-to-go-to-sleep—is willing to have his work disliked, if it's bad; is ready to rest content in dislike, if it's good. But which is it? *He* can't know. He thinks of all those pieces of his that he once thought good and now thinks bad; how many of his current swans will turn out to be just such ducklings? All of them? If he were worse, would people like him better? if he were better, would people like him worse? If—if—

He says to himself, "Oh, go to sleep!" And next morning, working at something the new day has brought, he is astonished at the night's thoughts—he does what he does, and lets public, critics, posterity worry about whether it's worth doing. For to tell the truth, the first truth, the poem is a love affair between the poet and his subject, and readers come in only a long time later, as witnesses at the wedding. But what would the ideal witnesses—the ideal public—be? What would an ideal public do?

Mainly, essentially, it would just read the poet; read him with a certain willingness and interest; read him imaginatively and perceptively. It needs him, even if it doesn't know that; he needs it, even if he doesn't know that. It and he are like people in one army, one prison, one world: their interests are great and common, and deserve a kind of declaration of dependence. The public might treat him very much as it would like him to treat it. It has its faults, he has his; but both "are, after all," as a man said about women, "the best things that are offered in that line." The public ought not to demand the same old thing from the poet whenever he writes something very new, nor ought it to complain, *The same old thing*! whenever he writes something that isn't very new; and it ought to realize that it is not, unfortunately, in the writer's power to control what he writes: something else originates and controls it, whether you call that something else the Unconscious or Minerva or the Muse. The writer writes what he writes just as the public likes what it likes; he can't help himself, it can't help itself, but each has to try: most of our morality, most of our culture are in the trying.

We readers can be, or at least can want to be, what the writer himself would want us to be: a public that reads a *lot*—that reads



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widely, joyfully and naturally; a public whose taste is formed by acquaintance with the good and great writers of many ages, and not simply acquaintance with a few fashionable contemporaries and the fashionable precursors of those; a public with broad general expectations, but without narrow particular demands that the new work of art must satisfy; a public that reads with the calm and ease and independence that come from liking things in themselves, for themselves.

This is the kind of public that the poet would like; and if it turned out to be the kind of public that wouldn't like him, why, surely that is something he could bear. It is not his poems but poetry that he wants people to read; if they will read Rilke's and Yeats's and Hardy's poems, he can bear to have his own poems go unread forever. He *knows* that their poems are good to read, and that's something he necessarily can't know about his own; and he knows, too, that poetry itself is good to read—that if you cannot read poetry easily and naturally and joyfully, you are cut off from much of the great literature of the past, some of the good literature of the present. Yet the poet could bear to have people cut off from all that, if only they read widely, naturally, joyfully in the rest of literature: much of the greatest literature, much of the greatest poetry, even, is in prose. If people read this prose—read even a little of it—generously and imaginatively, and felt it as truth and life, as a natural and proper joy, why, that would be enough.

A few months ago I read an interview with a critic; a well-known critic; an unusually humane and intelligent critic. The interviewer had just said that the critic "sounded like a happy man," and the interview was drawing to a close; the critic said, ending it all: "I read, but I don't get time to read at whim. All the reading I do is in order to write or teach, and I resent it. We have no TV, and I don't listen to the radio or records, or go to art galleries or the theater. I'm a completely negative personality."

As I thought of that busy, artless life—no records, no paintings, no plays, no books except those you lecture on or write articles about—I was so depressed that I went back over the interview looking for some bright spot, and I found it, one beautiful sentence:



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for a moment I had left the gray, dutiful world of the professional critic, and was back in the sunlight and shadow, the unconsidered joys, the unreasoned sorrows, of ordinary readers and writers, amateurishly reading and writing "at whim." The critic said that once a year he read *Kim*; and he read *Kim*, it was plain at whim: not to teach, not to criticize, just for love—he read it, as Kipling wrote it, just because he liked to, wanted to, couldn't help himself. To him it wasn't a means to a lecture or an article, it was an end; he read it not for anything he could get out of it, but for itself. And isn't this what the work of art demands of us? The work of art, Rilke said, says to us always: *You must change your life*. It demands of us that we too see things as ends, not as means—that we too know them and love them for their own sake. This change is beyond us, perhaps, during the active, greedy and powerful hours of our lives; but during the contemplative and sympathetic hours of our reading, our listening, our looking, it is surely within our power, if we choose to make it so, if we choose to let one part of our nature follow its natural desires. So I say to you, for a closing sentence: *Read at whim! read at whim!*



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# *Dirge*

THEODORE ROETHKE

I

I would praise:

—Those who will be compelled to dance
Through a final flame;

—The pathetic, with their flaccid
Beauty;

—Compilers of lines, inert
In their own paltriness;

—Their streets streaming with
Ice, their immobile children staring
    On far stars,
Their tears welling out of
A cradle of naphtha.

I would praise:

—The Holy Korean dead,
Aging their bodies in
Straw, in the slime
Of deliberate napalm;

—That coolest trickling,
Cooler than wind—
Than wind-divided streams tumbling
Down from glaciers

(Easy as the cobra's stare)

—The last scream
Of the dying,
The dying
Young.



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II

And I would praise the interdictory bombers, at night sleeping in the
Korean straw houses—and their watching doctors:
The eternal waiting before the 100th mission;
The steady-eyed mixers of the jellied petroleum, those clear-eyed pilots;
The guardians of the Pyongtaek pipeline from the raging seacoast,
Bringing, in convoy, their supplies, the final candy for children;
And I would praise the *keloids,* the loose leathery saddles on the bodies
of limping children,
(What a sweet shrinking away, an inexorable shrinking!)
For I remember, I recollect, I have been told:
One single splatter equals a *keloid.*
*Father of us all,*
*For this I would have us forgiven.*

III

And I have been delighted, vicariously, thinking of the sweet smells rising
from dying bodies;
Those retreating armies, who left their own dead for the flies on
the African desert—
The sweet effluvia ascending from the gradually distending bellies:
That surest of clues, that friend to the animal nostril,
Telling him truly friend or enemy no longer was lurking,
But lay in his own lovely bones, his flesh unlovely;

And lonely in space,
A fighting man,
An hyena
In habit,
Eating.

Some times:

In the drifting mists,
In the raw wintry morning.



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IV

And I would praise the looped bootlace,
That surest of weapons:
With the sleeping—
Or sleepless—
Sentry.

✪ THEODORE ROETHKE has received a National Book Award, a Bollingen Prize, and the Edna St. Vincent Millay Award for *Words for the Wind*, a collection of poetry. He is a professor of English at the University of Washington. Another of his earlier collected works, *The Waking*, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1954.



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# *The Horses*

Translated from the Spanish of Jorge Guillén

by RICHARD WILBUR

Shaggy and heavily natural, they stand
Immobile under their thick and cumbrous manes,
Pent in a barbed enclosure which contains,
By way of compensation, grazing-land.

Nothing disturbs them now. In slow increase
They fatten like the grass. Doomed to be idle,
To haul no cart or wagon, wear no bridle,
They grow into a vegetable peace.

Soul is the issue of so strict a fate.
They harbor visions in their waking eyes,
And with their quiet ears participate
In heaven's pure serenity, which lies
So near all things—yet from the beasts concealed.
Serene now, superhuman, they crop their field.

✪ The poetry of RICHARD WILBUR, professor of English at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, has appeared in this country and abroad. His published works include several volumes of poetry and a translation of Molière's *The Misanthrope*. Mr. Wilbur's third book of poetry, *Things of This World*, received the Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award in 1957.



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# Modern Poetry as a Religion

KARL SHAPIRO

SOME CLEVER FRENCH CRITIC once said that the nineteenth century began with the poetry of religion and ended with the religion of poetry. This saying, although I doubt its authenticity, sticks in my mind; it is one of those epigrams that would be fascinating to document and even to write a book about. One can see the plan of strategy at once: the nineteenth century begins in France with the romantic Catholicism of Chateaubriand and ends with the poet-priests Mallarmé and Valéry. It begins in England with the religious mysticism of Blake and Wordsworth and ends with the poetic high seriousness of Arnold, Pater and Yeats. Even in America the equation works, with the poetic mysticism of Emerson and Whitman turning into the cultural priestliness of T. S. Eliot. Anywhere one looks, in fact, it appears that the "poetry of religion" resolves into the "religion of poetry."

The trouble with epigrams such as the one I mentioned is not that they are false but that they are misleadingly true, like a card trick. And when we analyze such a saying, which is made in good faith certainly, we find that it is not an answer after all, but only a new question to be solved. It is an elegant question, and it is hard to resist answering.

The question is whether modern poetry has metamorphosed into a religion. And the answer is Yes. But then one must define both "modern poetry" and "religion," a tedious business. But like most poets, I have thought about this matter a great deal and have what I think is a passable answer.

In the first place, modern poetry is not synonymous with contemporary poetry. Modern poetry, to my mind, refers to a group of writings of about one decade, say 1915-1925, and comprising all the works which we refer to mentally when we use the term "modern."

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And not all these works are poetry. In this little decade we find Pound's *Cathay, Mauberley, XVI Cantos*; Eliot's *Prufrock*, the *Poems, The Sacred Wood* and *The Waste Land*; Joyce's *Ulysses*; Valéry's *La Jeune Parque*; Yeats's *The Wild Swans at Coole* and his *Later Poems*; Marianne Moore's *Poems*; Laforgue's *Derniers Vers*, posthumously printed; Stevens' *Harmonium*; T. E. Hulme's *Speculations*; and such other profoundly revolutionary works of criticism as *The Meaning of Meaning*. It is these books that are modern poetry and criticism. Not modern are D. H. Lawrence, William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, and lesser figures such as Lindsay, Sandburg and Masters. Dylan Thomas is definitely not modern.

Modern poetry is a school, a literary philosophy, with definite and precise aims, all of which have been enunciated boldly by Pound, Eliot, Yeats and their associates and followers. This philosophy, called "classicism" in the textbooks, has its own poetics, its own aesthetic and its own world view. That it has fathered a new pedagogy and a new criticism, every sophomore is dismally aware. Modern poetry is the official poetry of the twentieth century in all English-speaking countries. But properly speaking, it is not a religion; *it is a surrogate for religion.* If we could digest this extraordinary fact, we would have the key to modern poetry as a religion.

Let us look at three or four of the chief moderns (classicists) in relation to religion: Pound, Eliot, Yeats and Stevens. Stevens sets poetry apart from and above religion. Yeats gingerly dissociates himself from religion, while pursuing occult and mystical studies. Pound comes no closer to religion than an Oriental ethic permits; Christianity he crosses out. Eliot alone makes a specific religious commitment. But at the same time, all four poets observe one or another version of the central Jewish-Christian doctrine of original sin. It is at this point that modern poetry differentiates itself from romantic poetry, whether by Whitman, Blake, Lawrence or Williams. It is also at this point that modern poetry becomes anti-American and anti-twentieth century. All four poets adulate the tradition, accepting the fall of man from civilization, and an aesthetic ideal that is capable of reinstating the artist as the carrier



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of civilization. All four are antihumanist and, therefore, politically pessimistic. All are antirationalist, that is, antiscience.

Modern poetry (still using the famous decade as the point of reference) recognized the failure of symbolism, the poetry-religion of the late nineteenth century. It is for this reason that symbolism is used sparingly, if at all, by our quartet. We note that Eliot takes off not from Mallarmé but from Laforgue, for symbolism is already bankrupt when Eliot picks it up. Pound denigrates the great symbolists for the same reason. Yeats remains closer to it, as Stevens does in a more superficial manner, but neither is a purist in the Mallarméan sense. (It is curious to see Eliot use the line from Mallarmé about Poe in which it is said that Poe purified "the dialect of the tribe." Eliot has no admiration for Poe but pays his respect to dead symbolism in that manner.)

Symbolism in the hands of the French lay close to a proper religion. It believed that poetry through symbols apprehended the secret meanings of the world. But symbolism failed as a religion in its divorce from the commonplace. A bona fide religion must have a pyramidal base and not merely an apex. Symbolism finally led to its own defeat through its own idealism; it virtually parodied itself out of existence in such works as *A Rebours*, *Un Coup de Dés*, and even in the tragicomic life of Oscar Wilde. When the movement collapsed, poetry found itself once again on the street.

It has always struck me that Eliot's use of Laforgue is somewhat counterfeit. Laforgue did not mean what Eliot meant by banality, for instance. To Laforgue banality was a phase of the landscape. To Eliot it is a religious miasma of some kind, related to spleen, *accidia*, and so forth. Nevertheless, our four poets all recognized the new attraction of the commonplace, the "antipoetic." Their object was not to exalt the commonplace but to explore it as a cultural site. Eliot's empty lots and sputtering lamps all point to the fall from civilization. Yeats has it down in a perfect epigram in which God takes the spinning jenny out of the side of—Locke. No French symbolist would have come that close to the history book. Yet symbolism was a profitable failure for the moderns. Pound knew that poetry must, according to his lights, descend to history and even



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politics, and he taught Yeats this message. Eliot's religion is, in fact, a *descent* from symbolism to a lower plane of poetic endeavor; for religion in Eliot is just another name for civilization.

Modern poetry claims a moral prerogative that is, in effect, a religious prerogative; but it does not claim it in the name of religion. Modern poetry claims a moral prerogative in the name of culture. It is this culture that is the substitute for religion and that is the cement of modern poetry.

There is, of course, no secret about the aims of the culture religion instituted by modern poetry. This poetry began, to be sure, as a poetic movement, or a series of poetic movements, such as a new classicism, imagism and so on; it then became a theoretical educational revolt, the more conservative motto of which was to "correct taste." The correction of taste led to a full-scale re-examination of history. It is very important to remember that with Pound, Yeats and Eliot it is not the history of poetry or of literature that matters, but history itself. Poetry is actually secondary to anthropology and sociology in the writings of Eliot and Pound. Yeats alone tried to escape from this culture revolution with his head; but his own later poetry is much contaminated with cultural theorizing and historical prophecy.

In what seems an innocuous statement in *Notes Toward a Definition of Culture* Eliot says: "The dominant force in creating a common culture between people each of which has its distinct culture is religion." Even so, he spreads his definition of this culture to include the "legacy of Greece, Rome, and Israel." In other words, it is not simply Christianity that the poet must transmit, according to Eliot, but the whole cultural complex of the Western past. This culture, supposedly derived from religion, is larger than the religion and subsumes it. Culture is, therefore, the chief business of the poet, his religion in fact.

It is my opinion that Eliot scamps the relationship between culture and religion, despite his own churchly affiliations. It would be unfair and pointless to accuse Eliot of exploiting religion for the purposes of literary ambition, but even a casual look at Eliot's religious views reveals that they are much more eclectic than the European tradition calls for. The chief object seems to be not reli-



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gion for its own sake, or even for Eliot's sake, but for the sake of civilization, for culture. Eliot approaches mysticism from time to time but retreats hurriedly into metaphysics. He quotes the mystics, but he is not on good terms with them. The mystics are too original, unmanageable and "home-made," as he says of Blake. Yeats, however, is a better example of the modernist withdrawal from religion into some cultural substitute. In Yeats's case it is magic and occultism that is the cultural substitute for mysticism.

Yeats begins an essay on magic with these words: "I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are; in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed. . . ." And in three doctrines, he adds that many minds can flow into one another and reveal a single mind, that our memories are part of the Great Memory of Nature herself, and that this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.

This credo represents only one of the phases of Yeats's occultism, but it is one that he never rose above. His use of magic is closer to primitive science than it is to mysticism. There is in all spiritualist and theosophical activity an element of spite, based on the envy of modern science and its triumphs. Even Blake's cry that "Sir Francis Bacon is a Liar" partakes of this bitterness against rational science. Blake, however, appears to be more of a true mystic or gnostic than Yeats. Mysticism and magic are two different things, and it is on the latter, inferior level that Yeats rested.

We should remember that in the great decade of modernism, magic in such forms as spiritualism and theosophy reached its greatest popularity among artists and intellectuals, and that it was, in fact, an acceptable convention of the poet. Eliot's use of the fortuneteller in *The Waste Land* is a very *topical* allusion. Rilke himself indulged in spiritualism, even though he was aware that greater powers lay in himself than outside him. (". . . my greatest, my most passionate wonderment lies with my own achievement . . . and with certain movements in Nature rather than with any mediumistic occurrences, however much they have stirred me on occasion.") But Rilke knew enough as an artist not to enter the lists



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against science or to fight battles for culture. Mark Schorer notes that neither Blake nor Yeats made a distinction between mysticism proper and magic. We gather from this observation that both poets were exploring the possibilities of a cultural mystique, a mystique lying outside religion and outside modern rationalist science. It is this intellectual demagoguery that turns most of Blake's later works into crank world viewiness and Yeats's into esoteric poppycock.

I take it that the failure to distinguish between mysticism and magic in modern poetry is deliberate and strategic. Religion is not a primary force in modern civilization, and some substitute for religion must be found. So reasoned the Pounds and Eliots and Yeatses and Stevenses. Mysticism proper was therefore suspect; it lay at the very heart of religions. The mystical must therefore be intellectualized in some manner. Stevens took the most tentative path, that of employing the minor techniques of symbolism and doodling with a theory of the imagination. Imagination is the providence in this version of the culture religion of the moderns. It is probably because of Stevens' relatively perfunctory view of a total culture poetry that he was not "recognized" by Eliot, Pound and Yeats. "The poet is the priest of the invisible," says Stevens in his notebook, but he goes no further. To do so would be to encourage the sweeping romantic outlook of, say, Shelley. We cannot understand the antiromantic bitterness of Stevens without taking into account his fear of mysticism proper.

Yeats's scrambling of mystics, alchemists, theosophists, Neoplatonists, and so forth, is his attempt to steer clear of both religion and philosophy. Science, of course, is his avowed enemy, but so are clericalism and orderly philosophical speculation. Occultism was to Yeats what anthropology was to Eliot—an instrument for fashioning the culture religion. It is commonly said about Yeats's interest in the magical that it helped him perceive his poetic images, or something equally silly. Yeats himself is responsible for that interpretation of *A Vision* and of most of his culture poetry. In reality, *A Vision*, like the notes to *The Waste Land*, the *Notes Toward a Definition of Culture*, or Pound's book on *Kulchur*, is a highly programmatic, even political work. The occultism suddenly jells into a practical psychology and ethics, providing not "meta-



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phors for poetry," as the spirits whispered to Yeats, but a full-scale commentary on socialism, democracy, famous periods of history and great men. The object of the book is to help create the cultural climate in which the poet can again take up the robes of authority, dethroning rationalism and clericalism. Everyone who loves poetry forgives Yeats this book, although it would be foolhardy to overlook its dangers.

All modernists, including Eliot, agree unanimously that Pound is the father of the culture religion of modern poetry. And Pound certainly makes no bones about it. He proposes to lay down a "system" and does. It is a way of life, an *Anschauung*, dealing with man and with nature. God, significantly, does not come into the system. Pound's anti-Semitism and anti-Christianity, by the way, are his version of the poetic liberation from religion. (I should think that Catholics would complain more than Jews about the *Cantos*.) Pound is almost charming in his arrogance about the founding of the culture religion—"these are notes for a totalitarian treatise and that I am in fact considering the New Learning or the New Paideuma. . . ." What this New Learning is everyone knows by now: a full-scale culture revolution in which the end justifies any means at hand, "ideas in action," and the rest. But in the long run, Pound turns out to be the weakest link in the cultural chain. Eliot's commitment to him, Yeats's acknowledgments and the tacit approval of the New Critics (students of the New Paideuma) all throw a strong light on their own motivations as culture religionists. It does no good to brush Pound off as old Assen Poop, as Williams calls him; he remains the center of the religion. Eliot does not miss an opportunity to defend him in every phase.

Eliot, however, is the key to the religion of culture. Eliot is the only modern of any consequence who decided to take the risk of religion. Pound was furious; it was almost as much of a betrayal as Jung's branching away from Freud. I do not pretend to know the ins and outs of Eliot's spiritual biography, for it is a labyrinth. But the most interesting thing about it is that it appears to be a highly suspect commitment, and may be no more than an intellectual strategem to capture confidence. When Pound calls him the Reverend Eliot, he is very nearly letting the cat out of the bag; evi-



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dently Pound refuses to believe that his prize pupil has really turned respectable.

Eliot's sanction of religion is a parallel to Pound's cultural sanction of fascism. Religion to Eliot is primarily a social question, and not a mystique. It is a dismal crutch for a society he detests. In Eliot's words: "As political philosophy derives its sanction from ethics, and ethics from the truth of religion, it is only by returning to the eternal source of truth that we can hope for any social organization which will not, to its ultimate destruction, ignore some essential aspect of reality. The term 'democracy,' " says Eliot, ". . . does not contain enough positive content to stand alone against the forces that you dislike. . . ." Notice how easily democracy becomes very nearly incompatible with God in this little recital.

Eliot's cultural development may be sketched in this manner. He begins as an uneasy symbolist; he knows something is wrong with symbolism, and that it has not worked. He approaches religion in the typical manner, by negating it (at a time when negating religion is an anachronism). The negation is also typical in its dual anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism. He then explores the possibility of a relativistic mythology, thus flattering the more rationalistic of the mythologists and anthropologists, such as Sir James Frazer. This is the famous "mythic method," and it is so overwhelmingly a *succès d'estime* that Eliot is suddenly elevated over and above Yeats and Pound and becomes the living incarnation of modernism. He has now earned the authority to proceed on his own, and it is at this juncture that he makes his extraordinary conversion to the Church of England. It is extraordinary in every respect, the last decision anyone would expect from a twentieth-century American intellectual and poet. Now, with religious authority behind him, and with historical tradition at his side, he begins the elaboration not of his poetry, but of his criticism. He even seems to defend humanism, although it is a brand that Eliot calls *pure* humanism (a kind that goes hand in hand with original sin). By fixing his spiritual authorities and antecedents, his literary references and forebears, he manages to rewrite English poetic history, resurrecting the forgotten metaphysical poets, burying the romantics and Victorians, removing Walt Whitman to a footnote,



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and so forth. Finally, departing from the Church of England orthodoxy, he scans the mystics. Any suspicion of parochialism is therewith removed, and he is now free to take up his real job of pronouncing about world culture. He becomes in his own lifetime a culture god. This is not the place to delve into the school of literary criticism of which Eliot is godfather. The New Criticism is one of the more noxious by-products of the culture religion, and it is too large a subject for me.

Before the *coup d'état* of the culture religion, readers of poetry tended to think of poetry as a "secular" art, or a refined amusement, an expression of the national or of the individual psyche. That is, there was at the beginning of the twentieth century very little doctrinaire agreement about the nature and the uses of poetry. Eliot began by explaining the uses of poetry and the uses of criticism, as Pound had begun with his great blast about a total cultural upset. But by 1925, poetry was no longer secular; neither was it religious, nor philosophical, nor rationalist. It had found a way to compete with every other form of intellectual activity: by pronouncing a curse on the century and everything it stood for; by plunging back into the past and "making it new"; by removing the arts from the people and returning them to the classroom; by promulgating new theories of the imagination, of the state, of the sensibilities, and of the spiritus mundi. Systematically, this culture faction eradicated as best it could any influence by D. H. Lawrence, William Carlos Williams, Blake, Walt Whitman and all other romantics and humanists. It ignored the great poetry being written on the continent by Lorca, by Rilke, by Cavafy (a much finer traditionalist than both Eliot and Pound).

It would be interesting to speculate upon the narrowly "Anglo-Saxon" character of this religion of culture, but I had best not go into that. Suffice it to say that this religion has all the earmarks of puritanism at its worst. Its bitterness, its sense of exile from one or another homeland or paradise, its strong theocratic flavor, its sanctimoniousness, its hatred of spontaneity, originality and freedom, its insistence on orthodoxy—these are all symptoms of the puritanical hatred of poetry and its cynical abuse for purposes of power.



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# *Nocturne: Traveling Salesman in Hotel Bedroom*

Robert Penn Warren

The toothbrush lies in its case,
    As you in your coffin will when
The mourners come to stare
    And the bristles start growing on your chin.

Oh, the soap lies in the dish,
    Dissolving from every pore,
As your poor heart in the breast
    When the clock strikes once, and once more.

The toilet gurgles and whines,
    As does History absorbing event,
For process is all, and who cares
    What any particular has meant?

Far off, in the predawn drizzle,
    A car's tires slosh the street mess,
And you think, in an access of anguish,
    It bears someone to happiness,

Or at least to a destination
    Where duty is clear, and sleep deep,
And the image of self, in dark standing,
    Does not pluck the hangnail, and weep;



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But you're practical, and know
    That wherever that place lies
You would find few customers there
    For your line of merchandise.

And there's nothing, in fact, really wrong here:
    Take a slug of Old Jack neat,
Try a chapter in the Gideon,
    Then work on the sales sheet,

And vision is possible, and
    Man's meed of glory not
Impossible—oh remember,
    Remember—in life's upshot.

✪ In addition to four volumes of poetry, ROBERT PENN WARREN has published many critical studies and textbooks. One of his five novels, *All the King's Men*, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. A new novel by Mr. Warren, *The Cave*, will be published in the fall.



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# *Going Away*

HOWARD NEMEROV

Now as the year turns toward its darkness
the car is packed, and time come to start
driving west. We have lived here
for many years and been more or less content;
now we are going away. That is how
things happen, and how into new places,
among other people, we shall carry
our lives with their peculiar memories
both happy and unhappy, but either way
touched with the strange tonality
of what is gone but inalienable, the clear
and level light of a late afternoon
out on the terrace, looking to the mountains,
drinking with friends. Voices and laughter
lifted in still air, in a light
that seemed to paralyze time.
We have had kindness here, and some
unkindness; now we are going on.
Though we are young enough still
and militant enough to be resolved,
keeping our faces to the front, there is
a moment, after saying all farewells,
when we taste the dry and bitter dust
of everything that we have said and done
for many years, and our mouths are dumb,



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and the easy tears will not do. Soon
the north wind will shake the leaves,
the leaves will fall. It may be
never again that we shall see them,
the strangers who stand on the steps,
smiling and waving, before the screen doors
of their suddenly forbidden houses.

✪ HOWARD NEMEROV is a teacher of English at Bennington College. His poems, stories and essays have appeared in the *New Yorker,* the *Atlantic* and *Kenyon Review. Mirrors & Windows* is his latest volume of poetry.



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# Ah, Love, Let Us Be True

## Domesticity and History in Contemporary Poetry

DONALD HALL

IN POLITICS, A REFORM MOVEMENT cleans out the city hall in one election; by the next time the polls are open the racketeers have taken over the reform movement. When Irving Howe wrote "This Age of Conformity," in 1954, he awoke many intellectuals to their casual conservatism; he started with courage in the time of McCarthy the slogans that have dwindled, five years later, into the clichés of complacency. Now David Brinkley can furrow his brow to ask Robert Frost, in a television interview, if he is not concerned about conformity in America; and John Aldridge publicly searches for heresy by deriving it from the Greek *hairesis*. It is not surprising that reviewers, from the quarterlies to *Time*, should blame the young poets for being married and having children, although fatherhood would seem to be about as conformist as supper. The reviewers are appealing, for the most part, to the ghostly image of *le poète maudit*; yet it is interesting, if only because it is so contrary to the tenets of the new criticism, that so many of them discuss the social class and behavior of the poets. I suggest that they pick their slogans from the anticonformist air because the poems contain uses of domesticity that disturb them. And I suggest that their disturbance is valid, but that they misunderstand its cause: domesticity is not directly connected with conformity, and domesticity is the real enemy. Conformity is social and public and protective; domesticity for the poet has uses that inhibit his extension as an artist.

✪ DONALD HALL is the author of two books of poems, *The Dark Houses*, published last fall, and *Exiles and Marriages*, the 1955 Lamont Poetry Selection. A former Junior Fellow in the Society of Fellows at Harvard, he is now an assistant professor of English at the University of Michigan.



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The social behavior of the poet is irrelevant to the question of domesticity in his poems. To mention Wallace Stevens at Hartford Accident and Indemnity, or Yeats with his poems to his children, is to win your argument with a critic who demands specific social irregularity in a poet. But if you are a young poet, and you have just won an argument by mentioning Stevens and Yeats, such a victory may seem more like unconditional surrender. We have daughters for whom we write prayers, but we are not Yeats. The anthology *New Poets of England and America,* which I helped to edit, confronted many of us with our obvious slightness as a generation of poets; we all knew what was *good* about us, but it took a collective annunciation to show us what was bad. None of the reasons I have heard adduced for this slightness (teaching or marriage or the cold war or national prosperity) impresses me. I mean to discriminate symptoms and suggest remedies, but not to speculate on the origins of the disease. I feel that I see a pattern among us of provinciality and evasion, which results in a reliance on the domestic at the expense of the historical. By the historical, I mean the sense of one's own time and the sense of it as a product of the past; this sense requires an act of the imagination by which the past exists in the present, although it is alien. History and contemporary society must be seen together, I think, to be seen at all.

The difference between us and Yeats or Eliot or Pound is not the habits of our daily lives (these poets differed sufficiently among themselves) but one of intelligence, knowledge and courage. If this is behavior, it is behavior of the spirit. It is not the poet's home life that is of literary interest, but any uses to which he may put his home life when he writes poems. If a man writes a love poem to his wife, it is childish to complain that he is conforming to a bourgeois institution; but one might well argue that in a specific poem the poet attaches a relevance to his love, or a value to his affirmation of it, which falsifies his poem and makes it sentimental.

I will need to make (but hardly to prove) a summary statement of my views on the poet's relation to intellectual history. For the past three hundred years, the poet has encountered a number of alternative possibilities for the construction of his *oeuvre.* He be-



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gins to write and think in a narrow corner, for he lives in no house or city that is common to the rest of the world, or even to the people of his own nation. No system at hand relates the phenomena he observes, or extends his observation of phenomena. He can stay in the corner and write objectively about what is close to him or subjectively about how his mind deals with his predicament. If he wishes to leave the corner and extend himself, perhaps he can exploit the characteristic dimensions of the church, where theory is made tangible and all events are connected; the difference between the modern religious poet and the religious poet of the sixteenth or early seventeenth century is that the modern makes a gesture of negation to the godless age he lives in; the older poet shares a point of view even with his enemies and discriminates within a general theological agreement about what is universally valid. If the modern poet will not go to church like the later Eliot and Auden, he can perhaps adopt some other systematic arrangement of the world that is not connected with an institution, like Pope with his deism and Pound with his social credit; or perhaps he can invent or amalgamate an amateur religion, like Blake or Wordsworth or Yeats. The virtue of any of these systematic alternatives is that they enlarge the possibilities of subject matter. The spirits who gave Yeats *A Vision* told him that they came to give him metaphors for poetry. They gave him not only metaphors he used in poems, but an inclusive metaphor of human history by which he extended himself into his greatest poems. The alternative I would attack is the one that remains in the corner, is objective, and is concerned with relationship. The poet says with Hollywood, "In this mixed-up world, all we have is each other," or with Matthew Arnold, "Ah, love, let us be true/To one another!"

Now fidelity is not reprehensible, nor is the poetry of love inferior to the poetry of this or that. It is the whole statement that is false, with its implied substitution of love for belief. "Dover Beach" is not a love poem; it is a melancholy reflection on intellectual determinism, and love is invoked as a compensation for the losses that history has forced us to sustain. We are asked to be faithful, ". . . for the world, which seems/To lie before us like a land of dreams,/. . .



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Hath really neither joy. . . ." I hope that there are better reasons for fidelity than disillusion. When Shakespeare entertains unhappy reflections on human suffering, in his courtroom of meditation, the thought of his "dear friend" restores losses and ends sorrows. Yet Shakespeare does not turn to love because of despair: his poem describes an emotional sequence to demonstrate the extent of his love; his poem is about love, finally, and not about suffering. When Yeats catalogues his friends or thinks of his daughter, he makes statements of general validity that do not depend upon the relationship itself, but on the attention paid to particular people; in no poem that I recall does he use a relationship as the evasion of another responsibility. Poets have always encountered and used in their poems love and friendship as they have included all experience; Arnold, however, uses it as an alternative to theology or an idea of history.

"Dover Beach" is a historical poem that includes domesticity as a positive force in a negative universe; like so many Victorian poems, its negation is beautiful and its affirmation repulsive. "Gerontion" is a remarkably similar poem, also melancholy in its determined lack of religious belief, but Eliot is no positive thinker, and deceives himself with no puns on the word "faith." If Gerontion deceives himself at all, as "The Hollow Men" was later to suggest, it is in his comfortable notion that his inaction is a historical necessity. Many contemporary poets write as if they had accepted Arnold's directive but had forgotten Arnold's motives; for history is present in their poems only by the historical oddity of its absence. Domesticity is an alternative to history somewhat in the way that subjectivism is an alternative to theology; a major distinction is that the interior world of subjectivism has produced work of far higher quality than domesticity. Subjectivism and theology, in contrasting ways, are abstracted from process. History and domesticity occur in time, and their subjects are subject to change. Yet I would argue that an imaginative vision of history resembles a philosophy of religion more profoundly than either of these alternatives resemble their more limited versions. They share the desire for total relevance; they share their potential extent. Really,



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they seem to represent wholeness to different types of mind: the historical mind is secular, sequential, and conceives in temporal terms; the theological mind conceives of absolutes in spatial, static figures. Of course a major characteristic of contemporary literature has been a mixture, wherein a historical entity is absorbed by a theological sensibility; change has been emphasized by spatial metaphor, as in the copresence of the temporally discrete in Eliot, Pound and Joyce. In Eliot's poems we can see the secular intellect developing by degrees into an intellect that resembles the poet's consistent imagination.

Subjectivism, which has occupied and displayed most of the best minds in French and English for a century and a half, has undergone no new developments in recent years. Richard Wilbur has moved from *The Beautiful Changes* ("Caught Summer is always an imagined time,") to *Ceremony* ("We milk the cow of the world, and as we do/We whisper in her ear, 'You are not true.' "), to *Things of this World*, the title of which indicates its thematic insistence on the objective. He seems representative of an increasing impatience, among poets, with subjectivism as a contemporary alternative. It seems played out. Andrew Marvell could once say, with his masterful irony, "Meanwhile the mind from pleasure less/ Withdraws into its happiness," and tell you of the pleasures while he qualified the morality of his inner retreat. Wordsworth, that capitalist of the imagination, crept into the strong room of recollection to fondle collected emotions, while outside in the new cities of England the world he rejected created poverty and early death to make the rich richer. It was Keats, among the English romantics, who most clearly saw the frailty of romantic subjectivism. However much he admired the urn, however much emotion its beauty inspired, he finally feels only the disparity between the world of permanent imagination and the world of change. He rejects the naïve limitations of the urn's philosophy. Yeats sailed through subjectivism and out into something else, for when he reached Byzantium it was to sing "Of what is past, or passing, or to come." When the young poet Yeats announced his departure for Innisfree, it was a departure that would foresee no backward looks. We were asked to



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dance in the woods with Fergus, and "brood on hopes and fear no more," in the "deep wood's woven shade" of the imagination. The three Chinamen of Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli" climb a mountain that resembles Byzantium, not Innisfree, for when they are high enough,

> On all the tragic scene they stare.
> One asks for mournful melodies;
> Accomplished fingers begin to play.
> Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
> Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.

It is through tragic art that we comprehend, and even accept, process and change. What the Chinamen see is the human history that Fergus and Wordsworth turn their backs on. History is change, and change is death. Yeats took the final step (possibly the step that makes us impatient with subjectivism) by which the inner world becomes not a fiction useful for escape, but a value by which we judge and interpret the objective world. Yeats makes subjectivism become historical. His development is a lesson for anyone. The gifted young author of *The Wanderings of Oisin* was discontented with his gifts; his searches took him into the theater and into a variety of esoteric religions; and think what you will of its spookery, it was *A Vision* that allowed his talents their range, for *A Vision* is a vision of history.

But our problem has not been that of Yeats, and our solution will have to be our own. Instead of inviting ourselves to Innisfree, we have been writing about families and friends, and rejoicing in our limitations. The beat poets, with their frantic peer-group of the "six best poets now writing" and their poems and prefaces addressed to each other, resemble the apparently opposite academic poets with their child- and home-worship. The feeling that is common (not only to the poets but to the whole generation, whether beat or silent—for beatness is only the noise of silence) is the sense that only the local and tangible is safe in a world without meaning; or that only these few friends exist to understand anything in a society of the living dead. Flux and chaos are the terrors outside our circles or our houses, and our images of respite look like statuary.

When Eliot and Pound were our age, they wrote out of a sense



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of history which no one now seems to possess. They had no systematic theory of history, but they had an imagination of it, and they had sufficient knowledge to begin to discern connections and disconnections. The result was a relevance as universal as a secular intellect allows, for history is the secular totality. They imagined the past in the present. The critical image of the great writers of the world in the same room, which Pound originated in *The Spirit of Romance* and Eliot borrowed for "Tradition and the Individual Talent," depends upon the same imagination that produces a Mr. Appollinax or the social complexity of *Mauberley*. The past is not only a constant judge of the present, but we are reminded both of what endures and what changes. We are joined and separated, and in the experience of separation we acquire the reality of the discrete. It is an extension of the spirit into time.

Copresence must be distinguished from something it superficially resembles, which, since the word is vulgar, I will call "timelessness." The latter is anti-historical and anti-intellectual. It says that history is bunk, that human nature never changes, that poems must include only eternal verities and omit any word that might ever need a footnote. It is a set of attitudes that requires labors neither of mind nor imagination. The truly historical imagination involves the copresence of the alien, not the domestication of the strange into the familiar. The historical man finds it neither just nor comforting to insist that he and Ghengis Khan and G. K. Chesterton and Eric the Red and Horace Gregory are precisely the same. The imagination of copresence precisely makes the alien tangible, but tangibly alien. The middle-class belief that all times and places are equally valuable is a kind of relativism that makes an atheist take side looks at Rome. Domesticity is the specious timelessness of relationships. Domesticity is the evasion of history, for us and for Matthew Arnold—but Arnold at least included history in his poem.

The methods of failure are as numerous as the men who attempt to write poems. There is a way of writing historically, and avoiding both subjectivism and domesticity, which evades poetry as well and which needs particular mention. To write honestly about our society is to be subversive, and yet a poem that is merely



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subversive can hardly exist. It is not, of course, necessary to see two sides of a one-sided coin ("Does Lynching Have a Silver Lining?"), but a poem that entirely represents the world that it hates, and excludes representation of the world of poetry and the imagination that it loves, ultimately fails and we do not return to it, however accurate its portrait of the society may be. It seems that a poem needs a contrary force, a standard of value against which the poverty of our society is judged; and this can be a force of the imagination alone, a quality of the vision of ugliness, and not a part of the linear structure of the poem. Surely Kenneth Fearing is excellently subversive and yet unreadable because of the frailty of his imagination. The best of E. E. Cummings is subversive (yet on the subject of spring rather than Boston, Cummings sounds like Norman Vincent Peale) and eventually reveals its poverty. Some contemporary poets, fearing the dangers of mere subversion, will bring in the domestic as an affirmative stopgap, the way Fearing will mention the blue sky or Cummings the flowers of spring. If you wish to include the life of your own times in poems, you must avoid both barren subversion and phony affirmation. For this reason, few young poets write about their times now, but go to Greek myths or Biblical stories. They are not using history, to which our entrance is always from our own time, but our small store of common knowledge. There is nothing really wrong with these sources, of course, if you do not go to them for the safety of their "timeless" authority, but few of the "Adam and Eve"s or "Herakles: a Quadruple Sestina"s of recent years justify themselves by their obvious excellence.

To try to see in what direction we might move, perhaps we can look at our writers of the immediate past. The American intellectual has generally been an eclectic, a pillager of castles like William Randolph Hearst. It is not so necessary for a European to know things; he breathes the past in his own air. The American must acquire the air of thirty centuries, not forgetting his own. What we sometimes dismiss as pedantry in Pound and Eliot—the languages, the historical references, the quotations—is the ground of their greatness. The young poets in America have failed in knowledge;



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we lack languages and we lack familiarity with other cultures and other disciplines. Most of us remain entirely ignorant of the intellectual life of our century and know nothing of economics, physics, psychology or even the modern science of linguistics. Of course good poets, not only Eliot but later Americans like Yvor Winters and Allen Tate, have rejected the ideas of their age as well as their societies, but their rejections have been made consciously, after acquaintance, and not accidentally, out of ignorance. We are a provincial generation, largely unaware of the past, of our own tradition, or of the nature of our limitations. Most of us have sheltered in the protection of the intimate.

If we are to change, we will not change only because we want to; yet a sense of failure is the only possible basis for change. I talk as if such a change were intellectual and volitional, yet it is a change of character in the poet; he must see the new life. The voices will have to speak to us before we can find the metaphors for poetry; but the poems that a greater historical vision can bring to us are poems of a greater complexity. The evasion of history by domesticity is a fault both moral and technical, for the quality of a poem resides not only in the degree of its coherence but in the quantity of units that cohere. History is necessarily more complex than domesticity because it includes it. Thus a possible avenue of extension for a domestic poet would lie not in rejecting his subject matter, but in adding to it a judgment of it based upon an act of the historical imagination.

Among the young poets, who have written with a skill that has become notorious, I find no one who seems to me as much in control of an extended subject matter as were Eliot and Pound forty-odd years ago. There are many, in fact, who write poems that move and delight me. W. D. Snodgrass is writing beautiful poems that I would have to call domestic; Edgar Bowers is writing with immense skill and strength of mind, but writes very little, and with extreme conservatism. Charles Tomlinson, who interests me greatly, changes aesthetic subjectivism into aesthetic objectivism, writes about perception like a philosopher, and finds the moral emblem



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of history in architecture. Geoffrey Hill, like Tomlinson an Englishman, sees politics with a massive, religious imagination. Robert Bly has written "Poems for the Ascension of J. P. Morgan" in *New World Writing #15*, where subversion is entirely overcome by the vision of another, contrary world. Louis Simpson has written on political and social subjects in fable and with incredible delicacy of tone and extravagance of imagination. These last three are those who seem to be nearest to what I am asking for—and it is with them in mind that I decide what to ask. Other poets supply things that they lack. John Hollander is almost uniquely concerned with the intellectual life of his time, but his poems lack the jointure of intellect and imagination that one would want in a major poet. Thom Gunn has the mind most apt in analogy of any poet in many years, a resourceful intellect, and a daring sense of metaphor; but most of his best work deals with the problem of volition, and seems restricted by it. These poets are young, and I leave out a number who are very good, but about whom I have nothing special to say. I mention them not to end by denying whatever gloom I have managed to establish earlier, but to give the credit that is due good writing. But my argument earlier was based on a premise that good writing is not good enough, and that none of us has yet attempted the universality of reference that greatness will manage to achieve.



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# *My Six Toothbrushes*

PHYLLIS MCGINLEY

Against the pure, reflective tiles,
Northeast a little of the shower,
Gaudy as crocuses they flower.

The colors vary; but the styles
Are recommended and didactic
(Some Fuller and some Prophylactic.)

I cannot, it is strange, recall
When impulse sent me forth to buy
These gauds, or where or even why.

But here they dangle on my wall,
Symbols of vanity and hope.
I watch them shimmer while I soap

And am astonished, more or less,
Discovering how has lived in me
Such rage against mortality

That I this morning should possess
Six, six! and all set dense as thistles
With tough, imperishable bristles.



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Polychromatic, they confront
My startled, half-abluted eyes.
Do these, I think, epitomize

The frivolous trophies of my Hunt?
Is my one Creed, my guidestar polar,
*In corpore sano, sana* molar,

Which has no care for kind or witty
Or learned ways or actual grace?
Disturbing. Well, in any case,

At least they do look rather pretty
Hanging redundantly in files
Against the cool, reflective tiles.

✪ PHYLLIS McGINLEY, known to her friends and family as Mrs. Charles Hayden, is currently completing two new books for children, an untitled collection of essays, and a narration in verse for a United Nations film. Meanwhile, she reports, "I am trying to write some poetry and to teach a new maid how to make crepes suzette."



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# *An American in the Thieves' Market*

LOUIS SIMPSON

In Italy the dead have all the passion.
They still reverberate among the broken
Columns and stones. And in comparison
The living seem
Content, in the light-garlanded piazza,
To stare at beauty, strolling with no aim
Between the silly fountains and the dim
Forgetful stream.

If I were an Italian, I'd pinch
Life on the thigh—*"Buon giorno!"*—with a smile.
This is my business day: the offered bribe,
Which I decline,
Then pocket—putting something in the glove
Of the police. At noon, enough of this.
And my old age is gazing, with my mistress,
Cigars and wine.

But I am American, and bargain
In the Thieves' Market, where the junk of culture
Lies in the dust—clay shards, perhaps Etruscan,
And wedding rings . . .
My father's ghost is ticking in a watch,
My mother's, weeping in the antique bed,
And, in a pile of swords, my cousins shed
The tears of things.

LOUIS SIMPSON, who teaches at Columbia College, was awarded the Prix de Rome and a Hudson Review Fellowship in poetry in 1957. His *Good News of Death and Other Poems* was published in 1955, and a new book of poetry titled *A Dream of Governors* will appear this fall.



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# The New Nature Poetry

ROBERT LANGBAUM

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO NATURE POETRY? Ask this question of your up-to-date kind of poetry reader, and you will get a stare of blank amazement. There isn't any, he will mutter, although he will soon concede that there *is* Robert Frost. If he admires Frost, he will probably assure you that Frost is no mere nature poet, the implication being that nature poetry can no longer have serious relevance. He will have behind him the authority of critical opinion, of even Joseph Warren Beach, who, in *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry,* the most thorough study of the subject, says that the very name and concept of nature have virtually disappeared from twentieth-century poetry. Frost himself is not a nature poet, says Beach, since he writes not about nature but about this, that and the other thing in the country.

Beach has in mind the philosophical and protoreligious concept of nature that flourished in the eighteenth century and was already on its way out in the nineteenth. The religion of nature derived from Newton's demonstration that everything from the fall of an apple to the movement of planets is governed by a single law. To people whose Christianity was waning, a nature so orderly seemed to offer new evidence of God's existence and a new source of religious emotion. But the religion of nature was threatened, first, by early nineteenth-century geology, which found in the rocks evidence of catastrophes that had wiped out whole species, and finally by Darwin's theory that the evolution of species is governed by a mindless force called natural selection. Under these assaults, nature poetry declined. Swinburne tried to be optimistic about post-Darwinian nature, and Hardy was definitely pessimistic about it. But

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both were being anthropomorphic still, at a time when the exciting new concept, the only one that could inspire conviction, was that of the mindlessness of nature, its nonhuman otherness: a concept having nothing to do with optimism or pessimism.

Now it is just this sense of nature that a number of contemporary American poets render superbly; so that far from being extinct, nature poetry has enjoyed a revival. It is better than it has been in a long time. I would like, through a few examples from contemporary American poets, to call attention to the existence and relevance of this new nature poetry. (There has been less of it in England, although there one would talk about Lawrence and Dylan Thomas.) But why, if this poetry is so good, should it be necessary to point out its existence? Because, I think, the term *nature poetry* has fallen into such disrepute that no one wants to apply it to poems he likes; and because critics who are looking for the eighteenth-century concept of nature will not find it in poems that are precisely trying to rescue nature, as it is in itself, from the outmoded concept.

Take as an example of the new sense of nature Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man," which contrasts the inevitably anthropomorphic human apprehension of a winter landscape with the landscape as it might be apprehended by the mindless "mind" of a snow man. "One must have a mind of winter/. . . And have been cold a long time"

> not to think
> Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
> In the sound of a few leaves,
>
> Which is the sound of the land
> Full of the same wind
> That is blowing in the same bare place
>
> For the listener, who listens in the snow,
> And, nothing himself, beholds
> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Or take Marianne Moore's poem about the sea, which she calls "A Grave" to suggest, as I understand it, the unmeaning nullity of the



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sea. She tells us in the opening lines that she will render the sea not from the human point of view, but as it is in itself:

> Man looking into the sea,
> taking the view from those who have as much right to it as
> you have to it yourself,
> it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing,
> but you cannot stand in the middle of this;
> the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave.

And the poem ends:

> The wrinkles progress among themselves in a phalanx—
> beautiful under networks of foam,
> and fade breathlessly while the sea rustles in and out of the
> seaweed;
> the birds swim through the air at top speed, emitting cat-
> calls as heretofore—
> the tortoise-shell scourges about the feet of the cliffs, in
> motion beneath them;
> and the ocean, under the pulsation of lighthouses and noise
> of bell-buoys,
> advances as usual, looking as if it were not that ocean in
> which dropped things are bound to sink—
> in which if they turn and twist, it is neither with volition
> nor consciousness.

One might almost suppose for a moment that the ocean has volition and consciousness, but this is a delusion.

In the middle of the last century, Ruskin coined the phrase, "pathetic fallacy," which defines among other things the modern reaction against the eighteenth-century style of nature poetry. The pathetic fallacy is the false description that occurs when, under the pressure of strong emotion, the poet projects human feelings into natural objects (Kingsley's "cruel, crawling foam"). Ruskin considers the pathetic fallacy justified as long as the distortion is psychologically valid, appropriate to the observer's emotion. Such poetry, in which the emotions are "strong enough to vanquish, partly, the intellect, and make it believe what they choose," can be good poetry of the second order. But in poetry of the first order, like Dante's, "the intellect also rises, till it is strong enough to assert its rule against, or together with, the utmost efforts of the



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passions; and the whole man stands in an iron glow, white hot, perhaps, but still strong, and in no wise evaporating." Poetry of the first order retains the "plain and leafy fact" of the primrose, "whatever and how many soever the associations and passions may be that crowd around it." Not only does Ruskin anticipate Eliot's attack on the "dissociation of sensibility" from thought, but he sets forth the program of the best twentieth-century nature poetry, which defines itself precisely by opposing the pathetic fallacy.

That is the point of the Stevens and Marianne Moore lines I have quoted. It is the point of Frost's poem, "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," about a burnt-down farmhouse. The birds fly in and out of the abandoned barn, "Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh/ From too much dwelling on what has been," but their sympathetic response is illusory. "Yet for them the lilac renewed its leaf," we are told,

> For them there was really nothing sad.
> But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,
> One had to be versed in country things
> Not to believe the phoebes wept

—not to commit the pathetic fallacy. The strategy of the last two lines is like the strategy of Marianne Moore's last two lines; only Frost lets us down so much more gently. In both poems, the inclination to commit the pathetic fallacy is a sign that the object is loved, as is Stevens' projection into the snow man. But in Stevens and Marianne Moore, the difference between man and nature is wider, more irreconcilable, more dangerous than in Frost. In Frost the life of man weaves so inextricably in and out of nature that it always comes as a surprise to the speaker to discover that they are not identical. And the difference poses no real threat. The perception of it is simply salutary. This makes Frost less radically twentieth-century in his sense of nature than Stevens and Marianne Moore.

The difference in Frost often defines itself against such domestic considerations as that of utility and ownership. In "Going for Water," the speaker gains an insight into water not as something to be used or owned but as it is in itself; and in "The Wood-Pile," the



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speaker realizes that the precisely cut and measured cord of firewood, unaccountably abandoned "far from a useful fireplace," has another *use*: "To warm the frozen swamp as best it could/ With the slow smokeless burning of decay." There is a suggestion of danger in the famous "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," where the speaker, who has interrupted his journey homeward and trespassed on another's property to watch the woods fill up with snow, pulls himself away reluctantly:

> The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
> But I have promises to keep,
> And miles to go before I sleep,
> And miles to go before I sleep.

The momentary insight into the nonhuman otherness of nature is salutary, but to prolong it is to seek unconsciousness, individual extinction, before your time. In "Come In," the speaker, who comes at evening to the edge of a dark wood, hears thrush music inside,

> Almost like a call to come in
> To the dark and lament.
>
> But no, I was out for stars:
> I would not come in.
> I meant not even if asked,
> And I hadn't been.

To consider nature purposively dangerous is also to commit the pathetic fallacy. Besides, nature in Frost never is so dangerous that his speakers cannot protect themselves against it.

Frost takes into account nature's destructiveness, but his examples of it are seldom very frightening. The whispering scythe of "Mowing" must in performing its useful labor cut down the pale orchises and scare a bright green snake. Before they "can mount again," the leaves of "In Hardwood Groves" must "go down into the dark decayed." But the scythe is whispering in effect that all is well; while toward the natural cycle, the theme that gave birth to tragedy and religion, Frost takes a merely commonsense attitude: "However it is in some other world/ I know that this is the way in ours." In "Storm Fear," the speaker, waking to hear the wind and snow seem to challenge him to come out and fight, is



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glad not to accept the challenge and wonders in despair whether he and his family will have the strength to save themselves in the morning. But even in this poem, we know that the despair is a passing mood, that in the morning they will have the strength.

Death itself is adumbrated as a sleep in two perfect poems, "After Apple-Picking" and "An Old Man's Winter Night." In both poems, the man falls asleep when his work is almost but not quite finished, his sleep corresponds to the sleep of nature in winter, and the natural process takes over his unfinished work. Forgetting what he came to do in a roomful of barrels, the old man of the latter poem consigns to the moon his snow upon the roof, his icicles, and sleeps.

> One aged man—one man—can't keep a house,
> A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
> It's thus he does it of a winter night.

This shows harmony with nature—except that the old man's "clomping" in and out of the room makes an almost supernatural disturbance, scaring the cellar and the outer night; while the lamp he carries keeps him from seeing out-of-doors, it lights only himself with his own thoughts. The noise and the thoughts suggest the slightest disharmony with nature.

In "After Apple-Picking," it is also thoughts of the day's and season's apple-picking, of the unpicked apples and of "magnified apples" better than any on the boughs that will "trouble" the speaker's oncoming sleep, "whatever sleep it is." Is it a night's or winter's dream of the day's or autumn's activity; and is such a troubled slumber natural or supernatural?

> The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
> Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
> Or just some human sleep.

"Just," of course, from the woodchuck's point of view, for the speculation reminds me at least of Keats's fancy that our next life will be a spiritual repetition of this one "in a finer tone."

It is not to quarrel with these poems—who could be anything but grateful for perfection?—to say that they are idyls. For there is a harmony even in the disharmony; they leave out the agony of



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dying. Here as elsewhere Frost's acceptances are won without anguish—partly because the danger is not dangerous enough, partly because of Frost's personal strength, which is always at least equal to the danger. His darkest nature poem is "Desert Places," where the snow and the dark wood are unambiguously desolate: "Snow falling and night falling, fast, oh, fast/ . . . The woods around it have it—it is theirs."

> The loneliness includes me unawares.
>
> And lonely as it is that loneliness
> Will be more lonely ere it will be less—
> A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
> With no expression, nothing to express.
>
> They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
> Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
> I have it in me so much nearer home
> To scare myself with my own desert places.

But even here, where Frost sees nature as a void and takes into account the implications of science (rare for Frost), he turns into a kind of consolation that perception of an internal void which would be for another poet the most terrifying perception of all. "Loneliness . . . will be less" together with "scare myself" suggest that the scare is the illusory thing, almost a game (scaring one's self and others) of spooks.

Such resistance comes of sheer biological vitality, a self-preserving common sense, which Reginald Cook in a recent book on Frost calls his *sabiduria*—a Spanish word meaning "the wisdom of a people welling up in any one of its articulate members." It is *sabiduria* that keeps Frost at the edge of the "dark wood," keeps him from following his insights through to their logical implications, from risking the destructiveness of abstract thought. "The world's one globe," he says in "Build Soil,"

> human society
> Another softer globe that slightly flattened
> Rests on the world, and clinging slowly rolls.
> We have our own round shape to keep unbroken.
> The world's size has no more to do with us
> Than has the universe's.



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He is able to shrug off those conflicts between man and nature, thought and reality, head and heart, science and religion, which since the romantic period have torn other poets apart.

The result is a poetry that delivers us from the poignancy of the historical moment to place us in contact with a survival-making eternal folk wisdom. We can live by Frost's poetry as we could not by Yeats's or Pound's. Yet his poetry, although it must rank high in our affections, is not likely to be the favorite poetry of the most serious readers, just because Frost does not call into play all our faculties; he does not make poetry of our ideas, which in modern times have mainly to do with our sense of the age. The poets who have since the romantic period made the greatest impact are precisely those poets who have made us most aware of the historical moment, having themselves not merely known about but felt the conflicts of their age.

That is the difference between Wordsworth's nature poetry and Frost's. To talk about nature in Wordsworth's way was at the turn of the nineteenth century to be at the forefront of thought, to take into account the science, philosophy and psychology of the age, its religious skepticism, the French Revolution, the problem of the modern analytic intellect as the destroyer of feeling. If nature was orderly and the self an association of external impressions, then a life in the country would insure you the most favorable impressions. It would afford evidence of God's existence, an alternative or supplement to revolution and political reform for man's improvement, and an object that could still inspire feelings, even supernatural apprehensions. The deliberate return to nature went with the deliberate cultivation of the feelings as the necessary antidote to the conditions of modern life. No nineteenth-century reader could share in one of Wordsworth's epiphanies—one of his revelations through visible nature of "the life of things"—without a very poignant awareness of victory over the age. That is what John Stuart Mill meant when he called Wordsworth "the poet of unpoetical [distinctively modern] natures"; it is what Matthew Arnold meant when he said that in "this iron time" Wordsworth taught us to feel again.

Now Frost's sense of nature as manageable is very like Words-



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worth's, as is his method of conveying that sense. For Frost, too, gives us little dramatic actions that culminate in epiphanies. But Frost's are timid epiphanies, for they deliberately stop short of, where they do not explicitly repudiate, philosophical implications; and they do not arise, as they often do in Wordsworth, from an impasse in thought, thought grounded in the age. Frost's moments of awareness are accidents that could happen to any one in any age. The sign of this is that they do not change the speaker who simply goes back to his business; whereas Wordsworth's speakers undergo a measure of conversion. That is why his poems can be read in sequence as an evolution from eighteenth-century doubt through romantic transcendentalism to Christian orthodoxy.

In the sheer power to render nature, Frost may well be our best nature poet since Wordsworth. Yet it is because Frost's sense of nature is so like Wordsworth's that he does not play in our time the role Wordsworth played in his, that he leads us away from rather than to the center of the preoccupations of the time. For Frost cannot embrace the transcendentalism that his sense of nature suggests; but neither does he have the so much wilder sense of nature that our latest nature philosophy requires. Our nature philosophy has been made not only by Darwin but by Freud and Frazer. It connects not only man's body but his mind and culture to the primeval ooze; and you cannot convey that sense of nature in poems about the cultivated countryside of England or New England.

It is about the tropics or the sea, the primeval sources of life, that contemporary poets are apt to write when they do in our age what Wordsworth did in his: when they convey in their sense of nature their sense of the age. Wallace Stevens is fond of seascapes, Florida settings and tropical birds. Marianne Moore goes farther afield with her tropical lizards, her fish and mollusks, her frigate pelican, her small Sahara field-mouse, her mongoose and cobra.

One of the reasons the new nature poetry is not recognizable as such is that it is so often about animals rather than landscapes. The poet is less likely to commit the pathetic fallacy with animals, for they have a consciousness of their own. Then animals do for the landscape what the older kind of nature poet had to do himself—



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they bring it to life. They are the landscape crystallized into movement and consciousness; so that Marianne Moore begins "The Plumet Basilisk" by distinguishing this Costa Rican lizard from the landscape we take him for at first:

> In blazing driftwood
> the green keeps showing at the same place;
> as, intermittently, the fire-opal shows blue and green.

The new nature poetry deals often with the line between nonliving and living unconsciousness—as its way of evoking "the life of things." For the new nature poetry is really about that concept by which living unconsciousness has come to be understood as a form of consciousness and, paradoxically, the most vital form of it.

Nature poetry, which must always be about the living principle in nature, declined as it became more and more difficult to assert that principle, especially after Darwin seemed to remove mind from even the higher forms of life. The new concept of the unconscious, instead, has extended mind to the very borderline between animate and inanimate nature. For it has connected the substratum of our minds with the minds of the very lowest reaches of animal life, thus reanimating all of nature and making nature poetry possible again. We have already seen how, by emphasizing the deadness of the dynamic and life-giving sea, Marianne Moore makes us feel how nearly alive the sea is, thus enhancing our sense of what it is to be alive.

She starts higher up the scale in

> THE FISH
>
> wade
> through black jade.
> Of the crow-blue mussel-shells, one keeps
> adjusting the ash-heaps;
> opening and shutting itself like
>
> an
> injured fan

to move down, through the equivocally living mussel-shells, to barnacles stirred into life, and only thus distinguished from the sea, by "submerged shafts of the/ sun," moving



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themselves with spotlight swiftness
into the crevices—
in and out, illuminating

the
turquoise sea
of bodies

to the unalive erosive action of the sea against the cliff. This inorganic process is more dynamic than the jelly-fish, crabs and toadstools that "slide" under its impetus "each on the other." Yet the emphasis in the end on its deadness and lack of reproductive capacity reminds us of the mysterious point where inorganic turns into organic process. The "chasm-side" of the cliff is

dead.
Repeated
evidence has proved that it can live
on what can not revive
its youth. The sea grows old in it.

Light is the vivifying principle in Wallace Stevens' "Tattoo," where the light, crawling "like a spider" over the landscape and under your eyelids, brings both your eyes and the landscape to life:

There are filaments of your eyes
On the surface of the water
And in the edges of the snow.

Along with the sense of nature's otherness goes the sense that it cannot be known in itself, that we can know only our own perception of it—not only our individual perception but also (and this is where the new nature poetry goes beyond that of the nineteenth century and of Frost with his "dark wood") the perception our civilization, our style of art, gives us. Thus Stevens gives "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and tells us how the round jar he placed on a hill in Tennessee gave a shape to nature, "made the slovenly wilderness/Surround that hill." The jar made nature *see*-able.

There is a dispute as to whether Stevens in "Anecdote of the Jar" is praising art or nature. I would say both, on the evidence of his other poems. Art is not the same as nature, but our perception of even natural beauty depends on an aesthetic—an aesthetic which,



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like consciousness itself, is a crystallization of the landscape but with an even more inexplicable difference. The rendition of nature through an art style calls attention to the fact that nature can be known only through an aesthetic. Thus it enhances our sense of nature's otherness and unknowability. It is no accident that Stevens and Marianne Moore are concerned not only with nature but also with styles of art and civilization—that they are known even for a certain preciosity. For there seems to be a direct proportion between our sense of nature as wild and nonhuman, and our appreciation of just the artificial surface, the distinctively "aesthetic" quality, of art and civilization.

Marianne Moore, who can render the sea naturalistically, gives us the same sense of its dynamics when she renders it in the static style of Dürer: "water etched/ with waves as formal as the scales/ on a fish." To render the jerboa or Sahara field-mouse, she starts "The Jerboa" with an almost suffocating evocation of the highly artificial and excessively opulent beauty of the oppressive civilization of the Pharaohs; and she does this largely by cataloguing the multitude (the section is called "Too Much") of African animals they tamed, carved, worshipped: took as models for and forced into their art style. After tightening the spring for fifteen such stanzas, she releases it in two stanzas where she evokes by contrast the happiness, beauty, freedom of the jerboa, who "lives without water," in the midst of nothingness, and without reference to men: "but one would not be he/ who has nothing but plenty."

In "The Plumet Basilisk," she no sooner brings the lizard to life from the "blazing driftwood" we take him for at first, than she says: "In Costa Rica the true Chinese lizard face/ is found, of the amphibious falling dragon, the living fire-/ work"—reminding us that the lizard was the dragon of art and mythology, even a god. Alarmed, he "dives to the stream-bed, hiding as the chieftain with gold/ body hid in/ Guatavita Lake"—a reference, the Notes tell us, to the yearly ceremony in which the king, "powdered with gold-dust as symbolic of the sun," plunged into the lake. Recalling Frazer, we may infer that the king renewed his vitality or godhead by returning to the source of it, just as the lizard at this moment returns to his underwater "basilica." "The plumet portrays/," we are told later on, "mythology's wish/ to be interchangeably man



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and fish." And the basilisk is rendered in its relation to other lizards—and to the whole of evolution, from water, through the Reptilian Age (the birds toddle in and out among sea lizards' tails "laid criss-cross, alligator-style"), to the dragons carved over the door of the bourse in Copenhagen. His retreat in the end from the observer is a return in consciousness to the legendary past of treasures guarded by dragons ("Thinking himself hid among the yet unfound jade axe-/ heads") and a physical return to the water ("his basilisk cocoon"). The regression is the climactic manifestation of his vitality:

> he is alive there
> *in his basilisk cocoon beneath*
> the one of living green; his quicksilver ferocity
> quenched in the rustle of his fall into the sheath
> which is the shattering sudden splash that marks his
> temporary loss.

There is a similar regression in Richard Wilbur's "The Death of a Toad," where the toad who has been caught in a power mower pours his "rare original heartsblood" back into the earth, lying "still as if he would return to stone," dying

> Toward misted and ebullient seas
> And cooling shores, toward lost Amphibia's emperies.

We not only retrace the course of evolution back to inanimate nature, but we are reminded of antique statues ("The gutters of the banked and staring eyes," "the wide and antique eyes") and the death of gods. In Richard Eberhart's "The Groundhog," the speaker sees in the decaying corpse of a groundhog dead "In June, amid the golden fields," first the ferocity of the natural process, of the sun's "immense energy," and finally the pathos of the whole history of civilization which the speaker has recapitulated in his successive responses to the fact of death:

> I stood there in the whirling summer,
> My hand capped a withered heart,
> And thought of China and of Greece,
> Of Alexander in his tent;
> Of Montaigne in his tower,
> Of Saint Theresa in her wild lament.



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The associations in these two poems are a bit literary, a bit forced, but they illustrate all the better the climate of ideas behind the new nature poetry. They also show how animals operate in that poetry to connect inanimate nature with civilization through our current ideas about the vitality of the unconscious life and the origins of culture in the worship of animals, the contemplation of the vegetation cycle, and the killing of gods to renew the fertility of the soil.

The same psychological and anthropological knowledge can be applied to landscape. In a remarkable poem called "The Mountain," W. S. Merwin evokes the divinity of a mountain through the dispassionate accents of a modern, scientifically minded speaker who inhabits the lower slopes. "Only on the rarest occasions," the poem begins, "can one trace the rising/ Slopes high enough to call them contours."

> Then
> It is with almost a shock that one recognizes
> What supposedly one had known always:
> That it is, in fact, a mountain; not merely
> This restrictive sense of nothing level, of never
> Being able to go anywhere
> But up or down, until it seems probable
> Sometimes that the slopes, to be so elusive
> And yet so inescapable, must be nothing
> But ourselves: that we have grown with one
> Foot shorter than the other, and would deform
> The levellest habitat to our misshapen
> Condition, as is said of certain hill creatures.

No one has seen the summit, although the attempt was at one time "a kind of holy maelstrom, Mecca/ For fanatics and madmen," and there have been recent expeditions with "expensive equipment."

> Very few
> Who set out at all seriously have
> Come back. At a relatively slight distance
> Above us, apparently the whole aspect and condition
> Of the mountain changes completely; there is ceaseless wind
> With a noise like thunder and the beating of wings.

Of those who came back, some were deaf, some blind, all "dazzled, as by a great light," those who perhaps went farthest lost the use of



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language and the sense of time—all of which seems "from earliest/ Antiquity to have excited speculation."

> One legend has it that a remote king-priest figure
> Once gained the summit, spent some—to him non-sequent
> But to them significant—time there, and returned
> "Shining," bearing ciphers of the arcane (which,
> Translated into the common parlance, proved
> To be a list of tribal taboos) like clastic
> Specimens, and behaved with a glacial violence
> Later construed as wisdom. This, though
> Charming, does not, in the light of current endeavor,
> Seem possible, even though so long ago. Yet
> To corroborate this story, in the torrent
> Gold has been found which even at this
> Late date appears to have been powdered by hand,
> And (further to confuse inquiry) several
> Pediments besides, each with four sockets shaped
> As though to receive the hoof of a giant statue
> Of some two-toed ungulate. Legend being
> What it is, there are those who still insist
> He will come down again some day from the mountain.
>
> As there are those

—and here the tension between the accumulating conviction and the skeptical language is resolved through a transformation of the discussion into psychological terms (myth is what happens whenever mind meets nature)—

> who say it will fall on us. It
> Will fall. And those who say it has already
> Fallen. It has already fallen. Have we not
> Seen it fall in shadow, evening after evening,
> Across everything we can touch; do we not build
> Our houses out of the great hard monoliths
> That have crashed down from far above us? Shadows
> Are not without substance, remind and predict;
> And we know we live between greater commotions
> Than any we can describe. But, most important:
> Since this, though we know so little of it, is
> All we know, is it not whatever it makes us
> Believe of it—even the old woman
> Who laughs, pointing, and says that the clouds across
> Its face are wings of seraphim? Even the young



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Man who, standing on it, declares it is not
There at all. He stands with one leg habitually
Bent, to keep from falling, as though he had grown
That way, as is said of certain hill creatures.

The mountain is divine in the same sense as Marianne Moore's cobra in "Snakes, Mongooses." Whatever we think the mountain is, its irreducible otherness remains; and the cobra's perfect singleness of line, as it stands up from the snake-charmer's basket, annihilates distinctions, showing "that when intelligence in its pure form/ has embarked on a train of thought which is unproductive,/ it will come back"—back to the otherness of reality. These intuitions of reality are like Frost's "dark wood," except that they involve, too, a distinct sense of the past, and therefore of the present. Since they stimulate us to apply all we know of current ideas, they bring out into the open what must be, I suppose, the ultimate subject of nature poetry—the divinity in nature.

The history of nature poetry is in a sense recapitulated in Wallace Stevens' "Sunday Morning," a lovely meditation arising, like the meditations of Wordsworth, in response to a landscape. The consistent water imagery suggests that the modern cosmopolitan lady is looking out over water as she lounges late of a sunny Sunday morning, aware that she is not, after all, in church. Certain tropical accouterments, "coffee and oranges,"

And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice

but remind her, too, of sacrifices more ancient still than Christ's:

The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across the wide water, without sound.

"Why should she give her bounty to the dead?" she asks. "Divinity must live within herself:/ Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow." Thus she comes past the rejection of Christianity to the transcendentalism of romantic nature poetry with its moments of private insight. She remembers the alienation of religion from nature with sky-gods like Jove, and how Christianity brought God



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back to earth again—although it bequeathed the uneasy question whether earth was to be brought to heaven or heaven to earth. Nature is her paradise; no, better than paradise. For death makes the difference, "is the mother of beauty," gives the outlet to imagination, the savor to life.

Awareness of death leads to a vision of *communal* nature worship reminiscent of the old vegetation rites:

> Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
> Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
> Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
> Not as a god, but as a god might be,
> Naked among them, like a savage source.

It is when we see nature as a source of both life and death that appreciation turns into worship. The natural cycle is the source of all religions:

> They shall know well the heavenly fellowship
> Of men that perish and of summer morn.
> And whence they came and whither they shall go
> The dew upon their feet shall manifest.

The poem ended here originally; but in adding the final section, Stevens not only completed his poem by returning us to the water and answering the question he raised about Christianity, he also completed his history of nature poetry.

> She hears, upon that water without sound,
> A voice that cries, "The tomb in Palestine
> Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
> It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay."

In terms of its own supernatural claims, Christianity is dead; but after all that has been said in the poem we must understand, too, that as the worship of the dead god, of the natural cycle, Christianity is part of an inherent religion that always has lived and always will live. The poem ends with one of the very best passages of modern American nature poetry, a passage which, deriving its poignancy from the strength of its resistance to the pathetic fallacy, expresses perfectly the sense in which, with what we now know



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about the unconscious life of man and nature, we can feel that the world both is and is not God-abandoned.

> We live in an old chaos of the sun,
> Or old dependency of day and night,
> Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
> Of that wide water, inescapable.
> Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
> Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
> Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
> And, in the isolation of the sky,
> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

Those "ambiguous undulations" are the point where nature poetry comes full circle from the rejection of the old religion of nature to the discovery of an inevitably re-emerging religion of nature at the source of things.

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# *Broader the Lawn in Those Summers*

LOUISE TOWNSEND NICHOLL

Measured, in mind, to the hammock, hammock to porches and horse block,
Broader the lawn in those summers, broader than now under elm trees
Grown even taller, and hemlock. Distance was lost in a dream lawn
Spreading in visional greensward, tree-strewn, familiar with shadow,
Lawn I would keep as an image, true and eternally faithful,
Room for the heavenly longing, the level and infinite summer.

✪ LOUISE TOWNSEND NICHOLL is a free-lance editor and literary adviser. Her seven collections of poetry include *The World's One Clock,* which was published this spring.



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# *Song in a Cloud of Hands*

W. S. Merwin

Shadows shaped like rabbits and the mottlings
Of cats shake loose into a frenzy
Of gesticulation, with a sound
Of washing, and as you were aware
The whole night is alive with hands,

Is aflame with palms and offerings
And racked with a soft yammer for alms
Disclosing always the same craving
Through the three seasons of leaves
And in midwinter when the trees
Are hung with empty gloves all over:
The coin called out for is ourselves.

As you knew, you knew, born into hands,
To be handed away, in time.

Meantime these soft gordians,
The fists of infants, these hands,
Padded crabs raining their prints
As on charts the contours of islands,



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Vulnerable as eyes, these fans
Without feathers, knuckled sticks over
Breasts flowing like shawls or sea water,
That can learn flights exact as swallows,
Make music, pain, prayer, these rags
Dangling like moss from ancient wrists,

Loose, are sometimes generous,
Closed, can hold fast for a time;
Uncurled, as in supplication, empty
As crystals and shallow as dry lagoons
Scrawled over by water bugs, what have they
To offer but love in ignorance,
Uncertain even of its own questions
As of the maps on its hands, whether
They lead anywhere at all.

✪ W. S. MERWIN has written three books of poetry, the most recent of which is *Green with Beasts*. He is now at work on a new collection to be entitled *The Drunk in the Furnace*. Mr. Merwin's translation of *The Poem of the Cid* was published in England last month.



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# Aesthetics in the Sonnet Shop

REED WHITTEMORE

WHERE ARE MY STATISTICIANS? I have clapped my hands officiously a number of times, and they have not appeared. I want them to tell me that the number of students taking courses in creative writing (poetry division) is increasing at the rate of 12 per cent a year; that of these students, 18 per cent are fed back into the system to become teachers of creative writing, 42 per cent go into advertising, 2 per cent turn into successful authors, et cetera. But my statisticians and their figures are missing. Like most creative writers, I have here before me only my typewriter, my typewriting paper, and a number of questions scribbled on the back of an old telephone bill: Are there connections between the teaching of creative writing and the present state of American letters? What are they? Has anybody ever learned to write in a creative writing class? Who? How?

A number of years ago, as an editor of a little magazine, *Furioso*, I participated in the composition of a number of mild attacks upon creative writing as a way to Culture. We ran a series of bulletins on how to write a novel, and we devoted a large part of one summer issue to the ridiculing of writing conferences. Shortly thereafter I was invited to take over the poetry workshop at the University of Iowa for its summer term—and accepted. Then I succeeded in setting up a regular course in creative writing at Carleton College. Then I was asked to teach a weekly adult education course in creative writing at night in a nearby town. Then came a poetry workshop at the University of Indiana. Then . . .

Life, I think it is safe to say, is like this. But it is much less like this when one is simply a teacher of, say, freshman or sophomore

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English. Somehow or other, creative writing produces irony and mystery faster than other subjects. It is, to apply an old remark of Robert Frost's, education with the net down. Why this is so I am not sure, but I am confident that it could not have been so—could not have been like *this*—in another country or in another age. The chaotic condition of American letters is accurately reflected, even magnified, in any creative writing class.

Such a class is uniformly remarkable in two respects: there is little or no separation of the talented from the untalented, or even of the trained from the untrained; and there is little or no agreement among its members about what constitutes literary merit. Let me consider these two difficulties separately, although they are obviously related.

From my limited experience with summer writing conferences I gather that they can only be run as come-one, come-all affairs. Thus the state poets, the local hairdressers, and the intense young English majors who are dissatisfied with their own schools' offerings are sure to be there together in damp (because it's summer) sociological confusion. One student will inform the teacher that she is anxious to win a prize in a petroleum company's jingle contest; another will turn out to be writing an epic about the Civil War; a third will be planning to teach creative writing in the fall in high school. In class, as a result, the discussion will bob disconcertingly from what a sonnet is anyway, to how seriously Yeats believed in his "vision." But the summer conferences have no monopoly upon confusion; even when a creative writing course is presented as a regular part of a respectable college curriculum it manages to attract a miscellany, a potpourri of intelligences, theses and tastes. A geology major who hates the English department's *Weltanschauung* will suddenly appear (he has a girl; he needs assistance in composing something from the heart). Next to him will be a mathematics man, I.Q. 165 (he'll write a Joycian fugue). And the English majors will be there too, some good, some bad, all disconcertingly out of context and not performing as expected. The surrounding discipline of an undergraduate college curriculum may eliminate a few hairdressers and jingle writers, but it will not make



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creative writing a sensible part of that curriculum's rationale, another step toward its cultural heaven. The teacher in such a situation soon discovers that to restrict his class to those who are clearly academically qualified is a safe way of disqualifying one or two of the best writers in the college. Accordingly, he too is more than likely to adopt the come-one, come-all principle.

And what of the "advanced" creative writing establishments, the Iowas and Stanfords where writers come, after college, to get M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s for writing novels, epics, the real thing. They are, I'd say, more wildly amorphous than the undergraduate classes. In a room sprinkled with "promising" individuals who have already appeared in *Poetry* or the *Wichita Review*, one will also find students who couldn't get "D" in freshman English. One will find Brooks and Warren militiamen solemnly trading sonnets with Kilmerites. One will find the dedicated, the deranged and the discarded. One will, in short, find anything. There seems to be no place on the creative writing circuit that can reasonably be described as a community—except in the sense that everybody is, physically, there.

This brings me to my second point: there is no agreement among the members of such communities about what constitutes literary merit. This, of course, is the natural result of the disorderliness of the community, and yet it is a point that needs to be labored for its implications outside that community. I grant that creative writing classes attract numbers of eccentrics; the summer workshops, for example, might be more properly labeled (and have on occasion been labeled) clinics. But I cannot grant that eccentricity, although present, dominates such scenes, or that the literary tastes there exhibited are unrepresentative of the national taste, such as it is. What distinguishes a creative writing class from other classes is not its eccentricity but, first, its "spread," which I have described, and, second, its commitment to the works being studied.

This commitment is total. The works are the class's own; therefore everything is at stake. Not Wordsworth, not Masefield, but the blonde beauty wearing slacks and tennis shoes in the first row "authored" the work under discussion today. Not Donne's extrava-



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gances or Whitman's freedoms, but the class eroticist's innuendoes must be evaluated tomorrow. In an ordinary course in literature, a contempt for Milton or an admiration for Eddie Guest can be suppressed readily, for there are other matters on the agenda that do not involve the making of judgments. In creative writing, however, such suppression or omission is impossible. The what-is-good and why-is-it-good questions have the center of the stage. Everybody has to present his philosophy of art and life; everybody's nerve centers are lit up as the class searchlight spins around. As a result very little in class can be discussed dispassionately, nor can anything ever be satisfactorily settled. Hence one gets the impression that strange, powerful, un-American forces are at work, forces that one simply doesn't find elsewhere in the academic world.

Such an impression is, all in all, a pleasant one. It is pleasant because it allows a skeptical participant in creative writing to imagine that these dark forces have been, somehow or other, nicely restricted to the one particular offering on campus that is acknowledged to be fruity anyway. In other words, it allows him to continue to participate in, or conduct, other courses in literature with confidence, with assurance, with the (false) knowledge that the values by which he lives are secure *except* in that ridiculous course where everybody sits around purring over their own works. In all courses *except* that ridiculous course one has biography, textual analysis, poetic appreciation, great ideas of Western Man, grades and other manageable matters to cope with; so one doesn't have to face darkness, darkness visible, as one does in creative writing—or at least one thinks one doesn't.

Unfortunately the darkness *is* present elsewhere. Those un-American forces that are evident in creative writing class are also present, although submerged, in a sophomore survey course or a course in Shakespeare or a course in American literature. They are the democratic forces that we live with whenever we get outside the curriculum, the forces that enable us, for example, to regard both Robert Lowell and Coya Knutson as poets. It is the virtue of creative writing that one can see these forces. The sad state of our literary tastes is there lit up like little (dark) Christmas trees in each classroom row.



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I suppose that what I have been describing is the familiar literary topic of our time: the lack of a center, the absence of common critical or aesthetic principles among the poets themselves. For these facts are notorious: we look about us, and we see on the one hand well-disciplined, well-armed regiments of academicians marching steadily, night and day, into the fray; and on the other, an ill-assorted bunch of shirtless, Falstaffian recruits who are, it turns out, supposed to be the leaders since they are the poets themselves. Thus it is commonplace to observe that we live in an age of criticism and an age of prose, not an age of poetry.

To sit in on a creative writing class is to make these observations at first hand. And if there is any part of the creative writing world that I would like to see incorporated in the regular discipline of our colleges, it is the part that enables students to witness this depressing spectacle. One goes off to Creative Writing 263 with, say, three poems to "do a workshop on." One has (one thinks) chosen them carefully to represent such extremes of competence, sensibility and talent as are available in the neighborhood: a sonnet beginning, "I have a little doggie"; a four-line something-or-other composed entirely of adjectives; and a definitely superior (one thinks) piece beginning, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." One sits down with confidence. Today things will be different. Today is the day to be Socratic, to draw the students out, to let *them* discover that there is sense, order, unanimity in the world despite rumors to the contrary. And what happens?

Fifty minutes or an hour and fifty minutes later it is not even clear that the grandeur of God is, shall we say, a more worthy (one must choose one's words carefully) subject than a little doggie, much less that the grandeur-of-God poem is itself charged with the grandeur of God while the little doggie piece is a dead flashlight battery. If it is a good day, the grandeur of God may eventually—and with great reservations—be given the nod; but if it is a bad day, the doggie may even triumph—probably because it is a bulldog. And on either day, one may be sure that the advocates of doggie will stand firm and unmoving through it all, as if they had been (and perhaps they have been) indoctrinated at birth in the merits of doggie.



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Of course I exaggerate (I am a creative writer). But this seems a good place to exaggerate. Creative writing courses have a bad reputation in good academic places, and if one is going to defend them it is best, first, to get their major faults out of the way. They *are* disorganized, undisciplined and given over to a kind of perpetual demonstration of our modern uncertainties. Furthermore, they are productive of a related activity, an activity that probably should not have a place—or at least a dominant place—in a good literary course: bonehead aesthetics. Of course aesthetics is a fine subject; there is nothing wrong with aesthetics. One cannot, as any aesthetician will be pleased to point out, ever hope to deal intelligently with the vast problems of literary values before one has agreed upon the kind of value one is looking for. Unfortunately, however, a poet—and everybody in creative writing class has to regard himself as a poet—has other things to do than worry about values in general. In fact, he cannot even begin with his eccentric activity until values in general have been put out of the room and values in particular let in. Nor, I think, can the reader of a particular poem begin to do with that poem what any author would have him do with the poem (namely, read it) before he has put values in general, at least temporarily, out. This is why aestheticians are the poorest audience a poet could possibly have: they never get to the poem; they get bogged down somewhere back of the ball park where the Word was invented. And so, unfortunately, do the participants in a creative writing class.

I do what I can, usually, to prevent this. My impulse is to throw away Socrates and dictate taste and culture to the assembly. Thus I make a short speech; I set forth a few clear, simple, immutable reasons for rejecting the doggie poem; and I ask coldly for questions. For a moment perhaps there is silence. Then the author of the doggie poem rises to say something that makes it clear to me that he has not heard me at all—and will never hear me. Then several other students for whose intelligence, if not taste, I have a greater respect begin to wave their hands furiously in the air to declare me mistaken. They agree, possibly, that the doggie poem is a bad one, but beyond that they cannot go. They have discovered



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that it is bad by a different route than mine; they suggest that my route eliminates not only the doggie poem but also the complete works of poets X and Y (poets which, as it happens, I would be happy to eliminate); and they insist that before we reject the doggie poem we sit down calmly for a moment and meditate about what poetry is anyway. Before I know it, what has seemed to me, in my pre-class innocence, to be the most elementary poetic doctrine has been "exposed" as an assumption of the first water.

And so we go at that assumption hammer and tongs. In the meantime the doggie poem and the grandeur of God are forgotten. We have done all the work that we are going to do today with practical criticism and have shifted over to aesthetics. The talk gets big and exuberant; everyone is happy, including myself, until at the end of the period we discover that we have been discussing precisely (no, imprecisely) what we discussed last week and the week before and the week before that; we have all adopted our previous positions as if chained to them; and, worst of all, we seem to have sold out, sold poetry down the river again in favor of aesthetics.

We haven't, however, sold out—at least not to the extent that we sometimes sell out in a sophomore survey course or in Shakespeare or in an American literature course. The aesthetic questions that come up in creative writing classes are reasonable questions. And although it is too bad that they have to come up—too bad that they have not already been answered, settled, agreed upon before class begins—their presence is to be preferred to their absence when, as so regularly in other classes, their absence is not absence at all, but suppression.

In a happier world than this one, it might be possible to have more, more, more creative writing classes. Students would be subjected to them at an early age; they would be asked to write poems, poems, poems in them. By the time they reached some age of grace and understanding—say, fifteen—they would all have been indoctrinated in the disciplines and conventions of verse and would not have to question them—at least not for every class and every poem —before going on to see how well or badly the disciplines and conventions had been observed, used, capitalized upon. In this happier



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world, then, poetry would be truly in circulation. It would be what we call a living language, and it would therefore escape, mostly, the clutches of the aestheticians. But what of things without that happier world?

Well, we *are* without it. It is just poetry's misfortune that in our time it has no backing—that is, no traditional means of going about its business—which makes its credit rating beyond suspicion. And it is just the individual poem's misfortune that *its* credit rating cannot be discussed without reference to the credit of the whole industry. One can't, I feel, hope substantially to alter poetry's or a poem's sad condition by simple curricular revision; one doesn't expect miracles from a few creative writing classes, either the ones we have or the new ones I would like us to have. But at least, I think, we should realize that the creative writing class, if properly conducted, can make a start toward the promised land as other courses cannot; it can do so because, for all its inevitable bumbling, it is vitally and continuously concerned with problems of literary taste as other courses are not. In it, as in no other course, the assumptions and conventions upon which our poetry rests become more than academic—become, in other words, matters either to be accepted and lived with intimately, or rejected as impossible to live with.

But what constitutes its being "properly conducted"? I am sure there are as many theories about this as there are teachers; and my own knowledge of the field is so limited that I cannot hope to describe here the range of available, going possibilities. I have only one principle that I would like to proclaim, a principle admittedly derived from my own experience but one that I refuse to believe is merely a sentimental one with me, a principle that I think is basic if creative writing is to do anything (or to begin to make a start to begin to do anything) about the crisis in poetry. This principle is a very simple one: creative writing classes should not be conceived to be primarily for creative writers.

Like most of the creative writing teachers I know, I never took a course in creative writing in college. I wrote, of course; I wrote all the time—and badly too. But I didn't write *for* anybody (except



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of course myself and the world and the future), and I don't remember having felt underprivileged because no arrangements had been made at my college to give me grades and credits for my activities. Hence the principle I have enunciated begins in my own past; because of my past I can't believe that any serious young creative writer will ever fail to grow up to be a serious old creative writer because he didn't take C.W. 362. More than my past is involved, however. My present experiences as a teacher are convincing me regularly that no creative writing class should be conducted as a talent-scout operation. I would like, vainly, to imagine that nobody in any creative writing class I teach will ever send a poem to *Poetry*, ever receive a rejection slip, ever live for ten or twenty years with the mistaken notion that he is a literary lion because of anything *I* said. The responsibility is not only an unpleasant one; it is also an impossible one to shoulder responsibly. I am constantly astonished by the writing schools—particularly the commercial ones—which set themselves up as the Way In. I am convinced that no writing school or writing teacher has any business saying or suggesting that he is in a position to provide a Way In. In no other profession is the Way In so exclusively the responsibility of the person who wants to *get* in. Hence I proclaim my principle that creative writing classes should not be, primarily, for creative writers; and so long as creative writing classes are conceived, primarily, for creative writers, I for one will be there dissenting.

If, on the other hand, such classes be thought of as important for English majors who are going on to teach literature, and important for all those others we like to imagine there are—those liberal-arts men and women, those amateurs who happily identify literature, and particularly poetry, with culture and light, and propose, upon graduation, to go out and become an audience for such enterprise while they are busily being bankers, brokers and housewives—if, as I say, the classes are conceived as for *them*, then, it seems to me, these classes have a good chance of becoming central and vital to any English department's curriculum.

English departments, after all, have a particular stake in poetry. Poetry, although it is moribund these days, is still the dominant



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force in our literary tradition. If and when poetry is simply abandoned as a living language, that tradition will be almost impossible to teach, to defend, to preserve. But one cannot preserve a language at a distance; one must both know it and use it or it will soon be unknown and unusable. Then where will our English departments be? What will be the registration for the Age of Pope? Who will be left to read Milton and Savage Landor? Where will our college convocation speakers get their quotations?

I wax eloquent. I think the colleges must hang on to creative writing (although they don't like it), and try to make it fit their disciplines (although it doesn't). The values of poetry, whatever they may be, can be more surely, more convincingly, more honestly confirmed and rejected by a man who has struggled at some length to get his own inept quatrains "right," than by a man (of equal talents) who has only dealt with poetry at the distance prescribed in conventional courses in literature and aesthetics.



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# *Spring Mountain Climb*

RICHARD EBERHART

Till thinking had worn out my enterprise,
I felt, and felt the flesh
Salt-swart, blood-sweet,
To which bird-song stung mysterious
And the white trillium mysterious in the wood;

I saw the mountain and the lake,
I followed where the source sounded,
Over boulders, crossed logs,
Up rugged reaches, where
The gates of mystery increased;

Sacred justice moved me, I entered
The ancient halls of visionary grace,
Bird-call sounded, sky
Appeared miraculous along,
And evil thickets held red histories;

Here divine justice made me sweat;
While an eye nebulous and profound
Partook of a huge nature, endless
Sufferings redeemed in rushwater,
Song falling, searching the world.



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Such were the signatures I saw
Written by the hand of God
In knotted density, mysteries
Of incontestable day, while I
Passed the singing brook, so

Controlled by its eternal sound
As to be a living witness
To spirit, and to spirit reaching,
And to the sound falling back,
And man fallen to his endless burden.

✪ During 1959-60, RICHARD EBERHART will be on leave from Dartmouth College to serve as Poetry Consultant at the Library of Congress. His last two books of poetry are *Undercliff* and *Great Praises*. A volume of his *Early Collected Poems* will be published next year. Mr. Eberhart was recently appointed by the President to the advisory committee for the National Cultural Center in Washington.



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# *Quand Même*

CONSTANCE CARRIER

Let fire lick at the hand,
an arrow pierce the heel,
a scar over the heart
mark where the heart has bled—

crippled, groping, the hand
will seek again what it knew:
the hurt foot move, like the heart,
through a land it stains with red.

Heart and heel and hand,
armor is not for you.
We cannot choose what we shall feel—
we are vulnerable or dead.

✪ CONSTANCE CARRIER teaches Latin in the public schools of New Britain, Connecticut. She is the author of *The Middle Voice*, which was chosen as the 1954 Lamont Poetry Selection.



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# The American Scholar Prize-Winning Poems

The Editors are pleased to present, on the following pages, the three prize-winning poems in The American Scholar Poetry Contest. First prize was awarded to Arnold Kenseth for "Death and Resurrection"; second prize to Robert W. Watson for "Odalisque"; third prize to Jon Swan for "Jonah and the Whale."

Over two thousand poems were submitted to the contest from forty-eight states and the District of Columbia. The prize winners were selected by John Hall Wheelock, Mark Van Doren, John Ciardi, Randall Jarrell and Louis Simpson.

Arnold Kenseth is pastor of the South Congregational Church in Amherst, Massachusetts. He is a graduate of Bates College, Harvard Divinity School and the Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. His poems have appeared in the *Atlantic, Poetry,* the *Christian Scholar* and other publications.

Mr. Kenseth, now forty-three, has been writing poetry since childhood. "For me, the writing of the poem has its own rewards," he says. "I like its call to honesty, to *no compromise* in what the senses see, what the language tells, and what the whole being affirms. Nothing sags a poem so much as a falsehood to the fact either in the experience or the metaphor describing it.

"I am voluntarily and gladly a Protestant pastor. I give full assent to the watchword of the Reformers that 'the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.' I am not unmindful nor unmoved by those gifted writers that this present age abounds in who cannot say this with me and who, indeed, find such a statement an anachronism and a pious fraud. I know their feeling; I admire their genius. Yet I take my own way and settle for a poem or two that may, who knows, speak to the praise of God and to the faith of men."

Thirty-three-year-old Robert W. Watson served in the Navy during the Second World War. He graduated from Williams Col-



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lege and later did graduate work at the University of Zürich and Johns Hopkins. He has taught English at Williams and Johns Hopkins, and he is presently teaching at the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina. Watson writes, "During the college season, I live in Greensboro with my wife, who is a painter, and two small children. Every summer we migrate to Passaic, New Jersey, where I take walks and write most of my poems.

"I have never published *any* poems. What I wanted to do was to get enough good ones together for a long-playing record, and let them be heard before being seen. I now realize that this idea is impractical for an unknown poet. Recently I have been writing plays. I have just completed one called *The Plot Against the King*, and will soon finish another, *The Hoax*."

On the staff of the *New Yorker* since 1956, Jon Swan has had poems published in the *London Magazine*, *Prairie Schooner*, the *New Yorker* and THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR. Born in Sioux City, Iowa, in 1929, Mr. Swan grew up in Iowa and Nebraska and attended Oberlin College. After graduation he worked with the Friends Service Committee in this country and abroad. He has taught English at Boston University and at an international school in Switzerland.



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# *Death and Resurrection*

Arnold Kenseth

I am your double man, though first you will
Me one estate: this meadowed flesh my bones
Do comfort in; the blood's warm brooks that hill
And waterfall me through; my browsing senses
Nostriled for adventure, five unicorns
That rampant in me run; the mind's huge barns
All attic'd overhead with my pretenses,
All cellared underneath with my unknowns.

And here I landlord, jubilant a while,
To store up meanings in the bins and ricks,
A sundial farmer faithful to my rites
As morning robins: except my brother, sin,
Prides in the yards and warfares at the gates.
And then my countryside is stones and sticks
And straw, and death soon wooden-fences in
The ruined body of my land all still.

Yet you recover me from my disgrace.
This little ground I am, this cipher earth
I corner in, this night that densely nights
Me down to stay; you mine-field with the sun,
The fuse as long as love, the burst a birth,
A second world after the blackout's done:
And out of my debris you timber heights,
And into my despair you hammer grace.



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# *Odalisque*

Robert W. Watson

How negligent they appear in this north light, our light,
Falling liquidly with dust from those high transoms,
Spilling over her form, still as a bowl of fruit.

She rests naked, carelessly it seems, on her side,
A long loop of pearls drops down over one breast,
Repeating the loop. Her pedestal, a couch, draped
With a dusty cloth, stands before a flower papered wall.

From his easel, he contemplates her; she does not notice him.
She thinks entirely of herself, and he entirely of her.

Cold air and light roll and flash over her form,
Pour around looping lines of flesh that waver
Below her dispirited eyes. Her right nipple stiffens,
Gathers itself against the tide. Elbow, shoulder, back
All ache, constrain to hold her form in stillness,
To hold her body in suspense against the crushing sea.
She lies aching and arched, negligent and beautiful
Before the trembling green of an imaginary garden
Under surging light on a cloth of red and saffron.

Her eye catches a glint of pearl; she thinks, unthinkingly,
Of her own pearl skin—a Venus bedded on a fanning shell;
Again she must feel that she is beautiful, an object of art
And adoration, her fire our light. But in her vanity
Does this elemental woman dream that she is everything,
The model of the universe, these pearls the stars
Of her heaven? If she feels this in her unthinking
Self-concern, why does she look dispirited then,



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Like some bead-telling nun in sleep? Does she in gazing
On her flesh think of approaching death? On viewing
Her pearl skin, that wedge of darkness at her thighs,
Does she despairingly sense the history of the womb,
Those ancient shapes winding and unwinding on its floor?
And looking on her breasts recall the fruit she ate
When time began . . . ? No. How can one so carelessly composed,
Stretched out on that dusty coverlet of fading red,
Ponder such thoughts in this cold north light?
What she dispiritedly ponders, we cannot know.
Yet she is the secret model of our dreams, who guides
All wanderers in sleep: arched in stillness,
Beautiful, negligent before moving light of day.

Sirens in the street ruffle the stillness in the room,
Embroiling molecules of air; yet neither hears.

He stands, idly it seems, a brush dangling from his hand.
The canvas at his easel is blank, flat, white space.
He contemplates her; she does not notice him.

He stands against light and noise thinking of her
As yesterday he thought of oranges in a bowl.
Mapper of half-known spheres, oranges and women,
He loves neither, but uses both to quench a double thirst,
To wet a double palate. To him the spheres of each
Are always new and changing, yet the same and still.
Our Galaxies—like floating trees—drift, bloom, give birth
And die in an endless sea of space, and she on the couch
Floats drifting, changing among flowers of the sea.
Not all his art can seem to fix, to still her shifting form;
Not all her art can still her shifting form for him,
Or calm the running sea of air and light in which she moves.



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In anger at disorder in the light, his hand tightens
On the brush, ready to assault the space, to fill,
To flood a canvas with the wildness of this turning room.
But then, perhaps, he calls to mind some day of serenity
When a woman naked on a couch, an orange in a bowl
Were shadowed and still, quietly geometrical,
Glowing somberly like last coals dying in a grate.
And that he must have thought was long ago, before his time.
Yet now somehow she settles down before his eyes . . .
She drifts into the garden, her swelling breasts flatten
Among leaves and flowers. She becomes the papered wall. . . .
To him warring air and light remain without the scene,
As if a glass door framing her were shut and he stood
Out in a storm gazing in upon her sleeping form;
And he can no longer separate looping lines of flesh
From looping of flowered paper, spread, or beads.

He holds a knife now, loosely it seems, in his hand.
With one swirling gesture, as a master skater on new ice,
He cuts in wood one long looping line, a few swift arcs,
And he is done. Yet his canvas remains blank, flat, white space.

She rises aching from her pose of negligence,
And covers breasts which in her standing seem to droop.
We see that she is neither beautiful nor young.
Without a glance at him or his work, now dressed she leaves.

The print is black, a few thin lines of white cut in black.
A figure of a woman sits, not lies, with one elbow
On her knee, a string of pearls orbited about her hand,
Flowers looping around her form. This place contains no light
Or shade, seems nowhere we have ever been. And she?
She is supported, indifferently, by nothing we can see:
A black flower arched on a flowered wall of black.
In one corner hangs a blossom, its lips open over her head.
Inside the blossom we see nothing but darkness. . . .
Unhuman woman, if woman at all, in a world not seen



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Even in our dreams, yet a world that must be everywhere—
We will suspend you in our rooms and meditate
Upon your simple shape winding there among the flowers.

Old oranges in the bowl glow like coals, fade to shadow
And go out. Light from the transom windows, our north light,
No longer spills over bowl or couch. All light is out.
He has gone. Yet in black stillness the scent
Of turpentine and oil moves into the invisible stream of air,
Spreading out the transom windows, and rolls slowly
Toward the scent of cabbage cooking on a floor below.



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# *Jonah and the Whale*

JON SWAN

In such weather, all kind and calm, smooth as the skin of silent drums,
With here on the broad ocean, no quick, terrible motion but the flash
And fall of gulls that lean on wind, sliding the empty air
That holds them there,
This pouting prow breaks through the easy sea, a puritan
It seems, scoffing the green, spreading luxury that, without strain,
Holds the whole heaven yet gives it back again.

Here on the middle waters, a mild morning, one cloud or two
Puff and oppose the jubilant view, like memories of energy
Haunting at a holiday; still, they fill the striding sail;
The cutting keel
Goes quicker through the green. North, at its edges, now grows gray
Into whose anger the boat moves, drawn, as if the singing storm
Shaking the day's calm wore beauty in its harm.

The surface was familiar as hills we walk on and the grass—
Living mirror of those minds the sun unbroken in its brilliance binds,
But dives and divides now; is split, hurt by the winds driving.
Cry, waves, and whine,
Gales caught in cables, keels rutting them, all pain and change but
Deep some leather-sided fish rubbing its nose on sunken hulls
Sits safe under all, under the crying gulls.

The boat, so low she goes, so hiding in the sea, now see again
Above her sides in danger, she drinks the water that would conquer her,
Rides on peril, steep and green, as we on April horses.
The same forces
That would defeat and sink her flying sails, lift and speed her.
She thrives in battle, dives through violence and enters pain
As if immersion brought her life again.

Yet from the fast, hurt ship they throw half the heavy cargo over,
The whole profit gone, rich wares for Tarshish overthrown, from Joppa come,
When silvered wheels and stone, gold spears and the untested shield
Go down to gild
The fields of darkness and the soft drowning plain. This holds her
High beneath whose white, ripped wood, torn doors, in whose dark hold they find
Jonah asleep beneath the grieving wind.



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And there is laughter rising where, under the deck and coiled stair,
And anger when the laughter goes, shifting lights first hide and then disclose
Him as he smiles, that prophet in the middle of dreams
Whose sleeping seems
More heavy in that hold than stone and heavier than gold:
Jonah called to Nineveh, of Amittai the son, whom God found
Out to preach His wrath, to wail proud towers down!

Over them the mast, measuring the stature of the crest, seems lost,
Wood against the wave, as if it strove to know what buries it and breaks
Its course, and shakes the hull when the sea runs down to curl
Against the keel.
They prayed and lifted their last treasure; Jonah, borne above
On shoulders up to the raging day, dove in the reaching wave
Leading to God's deeper kingdom or his own grave.

* * *

The sea he would escape is now his home; she hides him who had run
From her. Steep water opens and he climbs its sinking walls that melt
As softly as he falls. Above, he sees all Asia's light
Changed to night.
These waves—like music moving that possesses men, that steps
From them to heaven singing as she goes—both lift and deepen
Him here where the dim whale dreams to keep him.

You who have come must now remain. Confident day can't follow here.
Your birds among these weeds, your Sunday bells, are lost, their bright ringing gone,
And streets that led to definite doors, those wooden stairs to
The roof's high view
With all its eastern steeples, as in a pool reflected,
Have led you down beneath the feet of day, down to the shadow
Of a whale that grows like evening, black and low,

And hardly opens to inherit you. And will you rise from the
Belly of hell and will you stand firm earth again and, never wholly
At home on land, live within that rising fall where vision
Brings derision
But saves the city where you cry and call? And will you sing
Dreams of this abundant night and whale who's hunted, killed by day?
The air we live in brings him up to die.



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Below, the sea-weed in all seasons grows. It nests awhile fierce
Arrowworms, quick silver hatchetfish and, breeding there, medusae with
Their stinging hair; but blooms its upper limbs with broken stars
The water wears,
With jellyfish and sponge, rich ocean-orange. Jonah, rise, yet
Remember as you rise that root light blossoms from, its hidden work,
That houses all its flowers in the dark.

Above you, fleet of mackerel or ocean bass, a woven crowd,
A roving cloud caught grazing in the sun, like birds that lead a season,
Gaining the splendor they would spend, this fleet of burning sides
Like fire glides.
They rush noon-glory down those changing hills; their careless scales
Are living in a flame that, though they plunge it in the gloom,
Spreads swift as laughter in a frightened room.

And then at last, three evenings in a sea being past, to feel the quick
And ripple rise, the rushing size lifting in the waves, and hear the vast
And looming fish break open water, praising the dry land,
The shores of sand,
Man's home—raising spray and flaunting high his flukes; and, risen,
Gazes, through his changing, to far changeless hills whose iron would,
Man-forged and beaten, reach down against his blood.



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# The Limits of Analysis

A. ALVAREZ

I INTENDED TO CALL THIS ESSAY "A Paraphrase of Heresy." But a tour of the New Criticism is no longer necessary. In scholarly company Criticism (with a capital *C*) is no longer a fighting word. *The Explicator,* which began, in the best tradition of scruffy little magazines, as a revolutionary battlefield, all war cries and fighting footnotes, has become just another scholarly paper. Yesterday's critics have become today's contributors to P.M.L.A.

What, in short, has happened in the last thirty-odd years is not that the old Dry-as-Dusts have disappeared, but simply that they have been replaced by Dry-as-Dusts of another style. Perhaps this was inevitable; the pressures of academic life sooner or later bring down everything to plain method. For method is impersonal, almost an abstraction. It reduces to clear teachable elements the huge complexity of disciplined response and choice with which the reader otherwise needs to re-create for himself each poem. Method, of whatever brand, is always easier to teach than discrimination. The scholars substituted for the work of art the multitudinous details of its background; the critics replaced it with the details of their own technical process. Landscape or physiology? Either way the life of the work is hardly touched.

Granted all this is old hat. Granted, too, the technical revolution was necessary. In *Practical Criticism* I. A. Richards demonstrated blindingly enough that undergraduates who were, in theory, both specialists in literature and, the reputation of Cambridge being what it is, sophisticated representatives of their breed, were

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simply unable to read. The subsequent critical revolution restored at least that *sense of analysis* without which good criticism is impossible. For the sense of analysis is a token of sanity in all the varied critical fringes of literature. It guarantees that each judgment, each detail of interpretation, each generalization, is based on observation and argued from it. The critic is not simply exploiting his sensitivity in order to rewrite the poem in his own simpler terms. For example:

> . . . that miracle of the summer air, airy and glittering as the nets of the summer light and early dew over the strawberry beds—a poem so airy that it might have been woven by the long fingers of the sylphs in their dark and glittering Indian gauzes, floating like a little wind among the jewelled dark dews on the leaves of the fruit trees—this flawless poem . . . et cetera, et cetera.

The subject of that, believe it or not, is *The Rape of the Lock*. It is, of course, not criticism at all. It is simply a literary travelogue of a kind that no one now bothers with, apart from a few elderly members of literary circles and poetry societies scattered here and there in the interior. "Fine writing" has been left to the light essayists; it is no longer the final criterion of the excellence of critical prose. Back in 1930, in the first chapter of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, William Empson wrote:

> Critics, as "barking dogs," . . . are of two sorts: those who merely relieve themselves against the flower of beauty, and those, less continent, who afterwards scratch it up.

The scratchers have carried the thirty years since then. Criticism has ceased to be a questionable skill—a self-conscious parading of sensitivity had gone a long way to destroy such residual respect as the nonspecialist still had for the art—it has become instead an arguable one. Its opinions can be challenged on the evidence produced, its reasons are susceptible to other reason. There is no longer an impassable barrier between being sensitive to poetry and being intelligent.

There is, however, a difference between being intelligent and simply using one's wits, and a difference again between the latter and the mere fitting of a ready-formed technique to whatever mate-



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rial appears; a difference, in short, between a sense of analysis and analysis as an end in itself. Without a sense of analysis no good criticism is possible, although there might well be good critical theory. On the simplest level, the sure touchstone of a critic is the maxim: "By his quotations shall ye know him." The influence of Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot, for instance, is as much in what they quoted as in what they said. The critical case remains unproved without exact lines to back it up. And it is impossible to smell out the quotations without a peculiarly shrewd idea of the weight and mechanics of the language; without, that is, a sense of analysis. So it goes back as far as good criticism, as far at least as Dryden. Until the appreciators and the journalists moved in, the question was simply the extent to which the analysis was put down or left implicit.

But now, in the time of the dissectors, the question is of the use it is put to. Consider, for example, Doctor Johnson on the famous lines of Denham:

> O could I flow like thee, and make thy stream
> My great example, as it is my theme!
> Though deep, yet clear; though gentle, yet not dull;
> Strong without rage, without o'er-flowing full.

> The lines are in themselves not perfect; for most of the words, thus artfully opposed, are to be understood simply on one side of the comparison, and metaphorically on the other; and if there be any language which does not express intellectual operations by material images, into that language they cannot be translated. But so much meaning is comprised in few words; the particulars of resemblance are so perspicaciously collected, and every mode of excellence separated from its adjacent fault by so nice a line of limitation; the different parts of the sentence are so accurately adjusted, and the flow of the last couplet is so smooth and sweet, that the passage, however celebrated, has not been praised above its merit. It has beauty peculiar to itself, and must be numbered among those felicities which cannot be produced at will by wit and labour, but must rise unexpectedly in some hour propitious to poetry.

The analysis has embroiled the doctor in comments about the function of language that are both misleading and wrongheaded: "If there be any language which does not express intellectual opera-



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tions by material images, into that language they cannot be translated." "There is, of course," Professor I. A. Richards tartly replied, "no such language." But although Johnson's conclusions may be faulty, his reasons are not. The analysis is there only as part of a genuine critical response: the feeling that the lines are better than anything Denham, on the evidence of the rest of his work, could ever reasonably have been expected to do. That is why the doctor devotes his last sentence to explaining the mechanics of the poetic fluke—which has, at other times, been called inspiration. He analyzed, in fact, because he was unable to believe that a poet as undistinguished as Denham could turn out lines so good that were not also faulty. The analysis is there to serve the purpose of the judgment and, like the generalizations, is dictated by it.

The difference between this and New Critical analyses is not that the doctor is wrong and the analysts, on the whole, are right; it is instead that Johnson is, to use the fashionable word, *organic* and they are not. And he is organic—his analysis, generalizations and judgment are all part of a single process—because his concern is, first and last, with the poetry. He writes what I would call primary criticism: criticism that, as rationally, deliberately and lucidly as possible, gives a sense of what the poetry is like. This means it describes not only the mechanics of the verse, the interaction of the various complex elements, meter, imagery and the rest; it also judges the work and sets it down within some scale of values. The values may never be set out formally, but they are everywhere implied in the critic's tone, reasons and choice of works.

Secondary criticism, on the other hand, is concerned more with its own processes than with the work of art. This makes for a queer unrelatedness between its major and minor premises, its generalizations and local analyses. For example, off and on for seven years I have been working on a book on the Metaphysicals, yet in that time I have never once come across a seventeenth-century Metaphysical poem that fits Professor Cleanth Brooks's definition:

> The Metaphysical poet has confidence in the powers of the imagination. He is constantly remaking his world by relating into an organic whole the amorphous and heterogeneous and contradictory. Trusting in imaginative unity, he refuses to



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> depend upon non-imaginative classifications, those of logic and science.

It is an odd statement in itself; it becomes odder when you remember Donne's open, steady contempt for aesthetic values unrelated to the more active, skeptical intelligence; but it is oddest of all as a critical response to the extraordinarily tough, dialectical movement of Donne's verse, the continual pertinacity of his argument. Now that we have got over the shock of the conceits, it is remarkable how small a part, in cold blood, they contribute to the effect of Donne's work, and how subordinate they are to the remorseless and insistent logical movement. They are themselves part of the world of "logic and science." If anything, they are there as a kind of aesthetic disinfectant: to prevent the work from sounding too "poetical." Professor Brooks, in fact, is generalizing not from Donne's poems but from Eliot's essays on the Metaphysicals. And Eliot was more concerned to find traditional precedents for Symbolist devices than to define, in any disinterested way, a particular seventeenth-century style. There are, after all, only two ways in which a poet can criticize his own work: the first is to rewrite it later, which was the way of Crashaw, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson and Yeats; the second is to pretend that you are writing about someone else, which is what Lawrence did with the novels of Hardy, and what Eliot did with the Metaphysicals. There is nothing in the least questionable about Eliot's practice. But it is odd that Professor Brooks should have made the same mistake after so painfully picking apart so much seventeenth-century verse.

The reason is that the business of secondary criticism is to show above all how neatly the machinery can be set in motion and the wonders it can perform with such slim material. Fundamentally, this great rumbling of critical engines seems to me to be covering up a certain nervousness. It is as though the analysts were unsure of the value of the work they discuss, and so had instead to affirm at every point the soundness and verifiability of their method: "Poetry," they seem to say, "may be marginal, antisocial nonsense, but we can at least write about it as thoroughly and unsentimentally as if it were the latest A.E.C. report." I once read a paper by a professor of philosophy designed apparently to spread the message



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of the New Criticism to his colleagues. Its subject was the method of Professor Brooks and its title was a paradox: "Criticism without Evaluation." The theme was roughly that positive philosophers could now begin to respect criticism since it had at last been purged of all personal taint. The analysts had reduced the skill to "the explication of the various constituents of the work of art. . . . And because they have correctly understood the organic character of these constituents, they have stressed in their critical exegeses the functional role of the various constituents." By this token, the business of the critic is no more personal than that of the analytical statistician, or even, to risk a minor blasphemy, that of the positive philosopher himself. The logical inconsistency of the position hardly matters. (Who is to choose which elements to stress? Who is to decide about the primacy of the "organic character" of a poem? And so on. The personal elements are not so easily exorcised.) What is odd is the fact that Professor Brooks never, to my knowledge, tried to correct the interpretation. Of couse, no one is to blame for his admirers; but, as James said of Gautier's essay on Baudelaire, "One must, in some degree, judge a man by the company he keeps. To admire Gautier is a mark of excellent taste. But to be admired by Gautier we cannot but regard as somewhat compromising." Similarly, Professor Brooks would no doubt never have voluntarily gone out so far and precariously along the limb. But there he is.

He looks odd there because he is above all an educationalist. His achievement is to have reduced the immensely complex discoveries of modern criticism to formulas and methods simple enough for the needs of university freshmen. And this, after all, is something. But it is something rather more than is suggested by his philosophical protagonist. For by reducing criticism to impersonal descriptive analysis he has reduced the critic to the status of grammarian, who teaches literature, or literary analysis, simply as a useful way of "training the mind." Literature, in fact, dwindles to a kind of dead language, like school Latin and Greek, justified only by the degree to which it supports the pedagogical technology. We are back, by another way, to the position Robert Graves found in Oxford after the First World War:



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> At the end of my first term's work I attended the usual college board to give an account of myself. The spokesman coughed and said a little stiffly: "I understand, Mr. Graves, that the essays that you write for your English tutor are, shall I say, a trifle temperamental. It appears, indeed, that you prefer some authors to others."

At Oxford, where the methods of analysis have still hardly penetrated, one-third of the syllabus for a Bachelor of Arts degree in English is made up of Anglo-Saxon, Middle English and Modern Philology, a less daring method still of ensuring some element of "mind training." Both brands of professor, in short, distrust literature. For the English it is merely so much gentleman's relish, one of the amusements of gracious living, like port and six-course dinners, never to be defined or discussed, only to be surrounded, for professional purposes, by a few well-chosen facts.

The American methodologists, on the other hand, seem to distrust literature for precisely the reasons Englishmen like it: for its accretion of triviality. They seem afraid that some successful administrative pragmatist may one day demand straight out, "What is the *use* of all this poetry? And why do you, a grown man with a college education, devote your life to it?" The reply to this is simple: "If you can ask those questions, you couldn't even begin to understand any answer I gave you." But the analysts never make it. Instead, they first make their position worse by insisting on the absolute independence of aesthetic criteria from all others; they then, in a kind of triumphant reversal, show how their peculiar brand of critical automation produces organization men who are shrewder, less sentimental, more analytically wary than those who come out of any other educational mill. The best mechanical grooms for the mechanical brides are the products of the most rigorous aesthetic technology. It is for this reason, I suppose, that academic critics insist on a vocabulary of technical terms that never at any point touches those used naturally of human behavior. The discipline must be invulnerable, uncorrupted by life. And it doesn't matter a jot, apparently, that literature is *simply* human behavior crystallized into its finest, sharpest, most translucent form.

They are, of course, hardly fair on the students whom they



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subject to this technology. For the undergraduates, presumably, have come to literature for education, not for mere technique. That is, they have come to have their own judgment and experience developed, measured and affirmed by vital contact with what Matthew Arnold called "the best that is known and thought in the world." The professor who fails to encourage this kind of creative response shelves his responsibility as a teacher and becomes merely a specialist.

Teaching, however, is not my subject here. The critic, either as a professor or as a man of letters, has other responsibilities: to himself and to his position in society. Fundamentally, the fault of *merely* technical analysis is much the same as that of *merely* appreciative criticism, for all that one exploits is a method and the other a trick of sensitivity. Both are too easy; both, essentially, are at best middle-brow. The sensitives, of course, have never pretended their work had any truck with intelligence. The case of the analysts is less obvious. It is not so much a question of the complexity of their work—most of them know how to attain at least the appearance of considerable difficulty—it is a question of attitude. For the complexity of the analysts is simply a matter of technique. They go at the work of art, explicate it fold upon fold, for the sake only of their method. The process is mechanical and is judged, like any other technology, for its usefulness.

Genuine criticism, on the other hand, is never, in any obvious sense, useful. For it is not concerned with conventional values. On the contrary, its value depends precisely on the distance it keeps from the conventional. Everyone knows that the function of criticism is to serve literature; but it does not follow from this that criticism is therefore servile. What the professor is in theory, the critic is in practice: an intellectual. He is, I mean, someone to whom ideas are emotionally important, who responds to experience by thinking for himself. This, I take it, is what makes Donne the first properly intellectual poet. The intellectual thinks by virtue of what he is in himself, not because he happens to know the accepted technique. It is the business of the pedagogues to be useful, but it is the business of the critics to be lucid. Perhaps this is what Matthew Arnold meant in his essay on "The Function of Criticism at the



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Present Time": The course of literary criticism, he wrote, "is determined . . . by the idea which is the law of its being; the idea of a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas." In his "disinterested endeavour" to come to terms with the nature of a work of art, the critic also extends and substantiates his own values. The essence of his job, in fact, is judgment. The artist creates his own moral world out of his intuitions into the nature and significance of his experience; the critic does the same out of his intuitions into the nature and significance of the work of art. Both are concerned with a morality that is continually flexible and continually open to fresh impulses. Both are also concerned to make their intuitions, of no matter how obscure a nature, as lucid as possible. For it is lucidity, not complexity, that is the final token of intelligence and honesty.

The two essential elements of primary criticism, then, are judgment and intuitive pertinacity. The business of the intellectual is to be true to his own lights, not to find excuses for popular tastes. He can safely leave conventions to the administrators. The one demand that can be reasonably made of the critic is that he be original. In the last analysis, it doesn't matter if he is right or wrong, bigoted or generous, narrow-minded or catholic, provided he says his own say, gets his own feelings straight and sets up his own standards for inspection and, if necessary, for disagreement; provided, that is, he creates his own moral world with as much intelligence as he can muster. And this is the most fundamental form of commitment; it is not a matter of political dogma or accepted standards, but of the life of the man linking creatively with the life of the work. Apart from the artist, the literary critic is perhaps the only intellectual left who is concerned more directly with life than with abstractions. Hence he is an intellectual in the proper sense of that term: not just a man with an adroit, well-trained intellect, but a man who is qualified above all by the subtlety and depth of his human intelligence. That, as I understand it, is what Eliot meant when he disposed, offhand, with the whole problem of critical method: "The only method," he said, "is to be very intelligent."



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# *If You Don't Mind My Saying So . . . . . .*

JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH

With the possible exception of atomic physics, the most esoteric current topic is poetry. Perhaps it was, as the historians say, the earliest of the literary arts, and perhaps the first semicivilized men babbled in numbers because the numbers came. But no one would be likely to call poetry a folk art today, and "native wood-notes wild" is certainly the most inept description possible.

Some of the most serious and, indeed, most dedicated critics seem to differ irreconcilably among themselves as to what poetry is or should be, but they are nearly unanimous on the subject of what it is not —so nearly unanimous that they find merely embarrassing an occasional old-fashioned pronouncement like A. E. Housman's *The Name and Nature of Poetry*. Moreover, those of us who are not critics of poetry, and might be tempted to make the Philistine protest that modern poets are too obscure and "difficult," restrain ourselves when we consider the work of the few remaining traditionalists, most of whom seem to justify the critic's protest, "You just can't write that way anymore."

My mind goes back to a comment made by Mark Van Doren nearly forty years ago, when we were discussing some of the earliest work of the first "new poets": "So far as I can see they don't even hope to write good poetry; they are just determined not to write bad." And although I do not suppose any present-day poet or critic of poetry would accept that comment as adequate, it is a sort of minimum justification. Dr. Johnson's grudging acknowledgement of what he regarded as the minimum that could be granted to the metaphysicals has a present-day validity. "No man could be born a metaphysical poet, nor assume the dignity of a writer, by descriptions copied from descriptions, by imitations borrowed from imitations, by traditional imagery, and hereditary similes." Equally apropos was his reply to Boswell's question if there was not *imagination* in the poems of John Ogilvie. Substitute for Ogilvie the name of any one of several moderns, whom I shall not be unkind enough to specify, and Johnson's answer will still apply: "Why, Sir, there is in them what *was* imagination."

The classic statement of the same situation in its contemporary form was made by T. S. Eliot in *The Sacred Wood:* "Sensibility alters from generation to generation in everybody, whether we will or no; but expression is altered only by a man of genius." And of the minor poets who persist in using outdated forms of expression he says: "They have not the sensitiveness and consciousness to perceive that they feel differently from the preceding generation, and therefore must use words differently."

To that at least persuasive statement, those who find little to attract them in modern poetry may still reply that granted, for the sake of argument, the soundness of the generalization, the question still remains whether those who have striven to "use words differently" have actually found a way that is effective as well as different; whether they have, in fact, succeeded even in "not writing bad poetry," or only in writing a different kind of bad. Or as Johnson—to bring him in again—said of Thomas Gray, a new poet of his time whom he admired only for the "Elegy": "He was dull in a new way, and that made many people think him GREAT."

If the dissatisfied would-be reader becomes more specific and cites, for example,



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the so prevalent kind of metaphor that most of us first met a generation ago in such things as Eliot's twilight that was like "a patient etherized on a table" or Cummings' moon that "shook like a piece of angry candy"—if he finds them now abounding in, say, St.-John Perse, and says that they are not merely farfetched but suggest no similitude whatsoever—he may be told (I quote from *The New Critics and the Language of Poetry* by C. E. Pulos): "Metaphors that depend upon some significant resemblance between the ideas identified or compared may occur in science or philosophy or poetry. . . . But a metaphor that discards the principal of resemblance for that of arrangement, or that of 'disparity of action' or that of organicism [*sic*] constitutes a device peculiar to poetic language." Or to quote a recent review of a translation of Perse: "[He] creates absolute metaphors whose effectiveness owes little to reference. Such images as 'the white bitches of disaster capped with gold,' 'the Black who bleeds our lion cubs,' 'the field of black poppies where forked lightnings anchor' offered little hold for exegesis."

Come back with the statement that, in any event, a very small proportion of the reading public finds such metaphors meaningful in *any* sense and that few, for this as well as other reasons, read modern poetry at all, and you may get any one of several replies. From Robert Graves, for example, you will get merely a So what? I write poetry only for other poets, which is as it should be. Only my prose is for others. The more conciliatory are likely to reply instead that modern poetry is not popular, unfortunately, but that can't be helped. The poet must go his lonely way even though he would like to have readers at any price he can afford to pay. The most conciliatory of all may add that in the course of the necessary experimentation, a new way of using words that *is* comprehensible and attractive to a larger audience may be found, or that perhaps all potentially competent readers will learn in time to understand and to like what they now do not. In poetry, as in all the arts, revolutionary changes win what Madison Avenue calls "consumer acceptance" only after a considerable interval.

It may be that those who take the last position will be proved right in the end, but it can hardly be taken as inevitable. The implied proposition—Since all ultimately successful new forms of art are for a time rejected, *any* new form that is rejected will be ultimately successful—contains an elementary logical fallacy. In fact it is the same fallacy as one much beloved by some Philistines: Shakespeare's plays were rejected by the high-brows of his time but are regarded as supreme achievements by the high-brows of today; therefore, the movies rejected by high-brows in the early twentieth century will be accepted as great works of art by their descendents. And it may be significant that Robert Frost—by far the most widely read of all those contemporary American poets held in high esteem by nearly all "serious critics of poetry"—should also be the one who, although unmistakably modern, is the least given to the more easily definable "modern" devices and tricks.

It is hard to imagine either Frost or (to take another American who has remained outside the cults) Mark Van Doren concerning himself very much over the question of whether or not he is sufficiently ambiguous, mythological or aware of the importance of those metaphors that avoid "significant resemblance" in order to achieve "organicism." And it is by no means certain that some of the failures of modern poetry are not traceable to the fact that poets seem to have critics rather than readers in mind—as though the excellence of a poem were to be measured by the number of opportunities it offers the critic to perform his "explications."

All the attempts to say that poetry is not really poetry except in so far as it exhibits some one characteristic, such as "ambiguity," evocation of the mythic, or even the metaphor, are demonstrably silly because they so inevitably prove either that certain bad poems are great or that certain great poems aren't really poetry at all. Where, for instance, are ambiguity or metaphor or



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myth in "Great men have been among us" or even in "The loveliest pair that ever yet in love's embraces met"? What is metaphysical about Donne's "No spring nor summer beauty hath such grace,/As I have seen in one autumnal face"?

The statement that Poetry or True Poetry or Essential Poetry is so-and-so makes sense (and often it does make real sense) only if revised to read that so-and-so is a distinguishing characteristic of one kind of poetry. And it is encouraging as well as interesting to see that T. S. Eliot, who was the original inspiration of many such pronouncements, has come around to admitting as much. In his latest volume he regrets that he stated so absolutely his famous doctrine of "impersonality," and cuts the ground from under some of his most loyal expositors by admitting somewhat ruefully that the once so much discussed notes to *The Waste Land* are "fake scholarship," hastily concocted to fill out a volume the publisher thought too short. (Good criticism has been written for the same purpose. See Swift's, "Read all the prefaces of Dryden,/For these the critics much confide in;/Though merely writ at first for filling,/To raise the volumes price a shilling.")

Just how important is the question of whether modern poetry is being read by any considerable number of our contemporaries and whether it should or even could be? When Mr. Graves says that his is not even intended to be so read, he seems to imply that poetry cannot be expected to mean anything to more than a tiny fraction of even the literate, sensitive and well-educated public. If he does mean that, I think he is very wrong, and although poets may get along very well without readers, readers desperately need poetry—including poetry by men who, in Eliot's phrase, "have the sensitiveness and the consciousness to perceive that they feel differently from the preceding generation, and therefore must use words differently."

If, as I believe further, the arts have become in our day even more important than ever before as formulators and transmitters of those value judgments upon which a civilization depends; if science, philosophy and sociology now usually confess their unwillingness or inability to make such judgments; if religion finds itself incapable of persuading us to accept those judgments it does still make—then it is evident that either "the future of poetry is immense" or that post-renaissance civilization may well be doomed. Nor are all "the eternal verities" embodied in the poetry of the past enough, because (it was again Eliot who put it this way): "If we have no living literature we shall become more and more alienated from the literature of the past. . . . Unless we have those few men who combine an exceptional sensibility with an exceptional power over words, our own ability, not merely to express, but even to feel any but the crudest emotions, will degenerate."

Inevitably then (and although I dislike such gobbledygook phrases) we come back to the question of whether or not modern poetry is fulfilling its function as satisfactorily as did the poetry of certain other times. We also come to the question of whether, if it is not, this is the fault of something perverse or wrong in the aims and methods of modern poets, or merely the result of the unfortunate fact that supreme poets do not always happen to be born in every generation. And I use the word "happen" because, despite all theories about poetry as the necessary result of some historical process, some psychological situation, or some "crisis of sensibility," I am firmly convinced that only mediocre writing is ever accounted for in any such terms. Moreover, I am convinced that the emergence of a really great artist is determined by which one of the untold myriads of gene combinations possible in even a single act of human generation actually resulted from it. No doubt many of the general characteristics of Elizabethan literature are explicable by reference to a historical situation. But Shakespeare was an accident, and without him Elizabethan drama at least would not amount to so much after all.

As to the first of the questions—Does mod-



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ern poetry perform its function as satisfactorily as it might?—I suppose that all of the many, many nonreaders of poetry and some of the readers would answer No. And I suppose that, on the whole, I agree with them, although I am by no means sure that to say so does not imply an overstatement of the case. Without much difficulty I could name a dozen modern poems that have affected me profoundly and unforgettably. How much larger a number could I name from the poems of any other generation? There are, to be sure, a few people who just "like poetry"—a very few who like it so well that they can understand Lamb's friend who thrilled at the prospect of a very long narrative promised by a very bad poet because, as he said, in a poem of that length there was just bound to be a few good lines. But most of us, I think, are really moved by only comparatively few of the poems written by even the indisputably great poets—partly, perhaps, because even great poets are only rarely at their best; but more, I suspect, because the impact of a poem is dependent (to an extent greater than is the case with other forms of art) upon our own temperament, mood, experience and situation. We recognize that a given poem speaks to our condition, and that another poem no doubt speaks as eloquently to someone else. It may sound flippant to say, as in all seriousness I do, that although I need poems desperately, I do not really need very many of them.

As to the second question concerning the possibility that many modern poets may make their own task more difficult by firm devotion to perverse theories, I will take the liberty of suggesting that I myself think them wrong in one fundamental respect: namely, in their almost fanatical insistence that every line in every poem should be "pure poetry" or "essential poetry" or "nothing but poetry"; and for this reason they are wrong to be determined above all "not to write bad poetry." Writing bad poetry is a risk that has to be taken and one that the great poets often took, sometimes with disastrous results, but sometimes with splendid ones. Wordsworth may be the most outstanding, but he is by no means the only demonstration of the fact that the stature of a poet depends upon how much good poetry he wrote rather than upon how much bad poetry he avoided.

Perhaps there really is such a thing as pure poetry, pure painting or pure music. They have been much talked about during the century just past, much admired and much striven for. But it is not certain that the poetry, painting and music of that century have been the best ever produced.

It has very often been said that painting was "freed" to become "pure" when photography took over the distracting side function of representation. This freedom has enabled it not only to disregard literal representation but, ultimately, even abstraction from real objects; and it has permitted the most advanced painter to do what I have seen one critic describe as "painting nothing but paint." To those who do not agree that modern painting actually is the finest ever achieved, it can seem not that representation or storytelling is the essence of the art of painting, but that painting was most satisfying when its intentions were mixed. And I at least, Philistine though this may make me, suspect that in a somewhat similar way poetry was more effective when it did not consciously strive to be so impeccably poetry and nothing else.



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# .....*The Revolving Bookstand*.....

## From the Middle and Senior Generations

JOHN BERRYMAN

*Words for the Wind: The Collected Verse of Theodore Roethke. Doubleday. $4.00.*
*Poems of a Jew.* By Karl Shapiro. *Random House. $3.50.*
*95 Poems.* By E. E. Cummings. *Harcourt, Brace. $4.00.*
*Paterson, Book Five.* By William Carlos Williams. *New Directions. $3.00.*

Justice will not be expected, in a short article, to four of the salient careers of the age in American poetry; but even for a short article a point of view, or points of view, is necessary. One we may elicit from our title. Another will associate itself with the notion of self-reformation. A third might be sought in the contrast between the methods of the two men, Robert Lowell* and Theodore Roethke, whom I take to possess the most powerful and original talents that have emerged during the last fifteen years. The contrast is so deep that one would almost be justified in adopting the terms "eastern" and "western" style, without much reference to the fact that Mr. Lowell is from Boston and lives there, Mr. Roethke from Michigan, living in Seattle. Lowell's work is Latinate, formal, rhetorical, massive, historical, religious, impersonal; Roethke's Teutonic, irregular, colloquial, delicate, botanical and psychological, irreligious, personal. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Lowell is a poet of completed states, Roethke a poet of process. Both are witty, savage, and willing to astonish, but the fundamental unlikeness is great. If both are authoritative, the nature of their authorities differs, Lowell's being a traditional authority, Roethke's an experiential one. Lowell is formidable, Roethke endearing. One gets an impression, in their work, of the American spirit advancing on different fronts rather than on different parts of the same front; and I will come back to this.

Lowell, the younger by some nine years, found his main style earlier and held to it longer. After a merely promising beginning, it was not until 1948 that Roethke published a group of poems proving that all previous poets' attention to plants had been casual. Flowers and weeds alike writhed and lived on the page as they never had before. One hesitates even to regard these poems as symbolic, although of course they are. Instead of making a career out of this, the poet deepened botany into biology, took on the full influence of Whitman, made his rhythms jump, and produced the extraordinary sequence of longish poems in *Praise to the End* (1951), which is his largest achievement and one of the fixed objects, I should think, in our poetry. Childhood, money, eating, love, lostness and foundness in natural process, fear, consolation (Roethke is one of the few tender American poets) are the interlocking, joking, dissolving subjects. Since 1951 his jokes have become less sinister and desolate; and although he has written delightful poems, one has a sense of a marking of time in relation to the giant steps earlier. Surprisingly, much of his work has become "literary"; he has submitted gleefully to the influences—mostly disastrous—of Yeats, even Eliot, and others. One does not need the persistence of delicious detail—

> I am my father's son, I am John Donne
> Whenever I see her with nothing on

—to see that his talent, or genius, is still fully alive. But I think few critical readers

* Robert Lowell's new book, *Life Studies* (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, $3.50), was received too late for comment.

JOHN BERRYMAN's latest books are *His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt* and *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet and Other Poems* (London: Faber & Faber), for the title poem of which he won the Harriet Monroe Award. He has received a National Institute Award and a Shelley Memorial Award. Mr. Berryman teaches Humanities at the University of Minnesota.



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will feel that his new self-reformation is as yet either at all complete or satisfying. The channel is unclear. One can only express gratitude and wish luck.

Can we regard Roethke and Lowell as members of one poetic generation? Considering the figure of Karl Shapiro, whose age divides theirs and who, as we will see in a moment, certainly ought to be able to be regarded as a member of a generation, it would seem that they can. But I wonder whether the question has meaning in a society where the attention paid to poetry is so very slight. A "generation" in this sense, apart from the private sense of coworking that an artist may have, is a public conception—one that still exists in England and France. But probably the American conception of a poet is of a man dead, or in his eighties (Mr. Frost, Mr. Sandburg), or a European (*Time*, a fair barometer, reviews European poets with noticeably more enthusiasm than Americans, when it reviews poets at all). No sense of a generation of poets will flow from this conception; one thinks instead of isolated pockets of spiritual activity. Of course Americans do not read anything. Some poll lately suggested that only one college graduate in four had read a book—any book—during the past year; the populace at large, as one would expect, reads a little more, but not much. Poetry is only read *less* than other sorts of writing. "The poet is like one who enters and mounts a platform to give an address as announced. He opens his page, looks around, and finds the hall—*empty*." If this could be written forty years ago in England, what shall we say now of America? It is customary to blame the poets for the situation. But it is hard to feel that Thomas Hardy, or Mr. Lowell or Mr. Roethke, is not doing his job.

I am putting a case, in terms of the poet's presumable feeling, that will affect his work and so matters to us. It is worth notice, then, that the American poet has come to enjoy almost no immediate audience at a time, exactly, when the notion of a posterity is obscured (and when serious music, largely by dead men, and modern painting have, against expectation, developed very large paying audiences—perhaps rather as spectator sports than as involving much of the participation essential to poetry's effect). Is this matter for discouragement? It is a matter for despair perhaps, if unduly attended to, or for indifference, in a busy man, but I hope not discouragement. The motives for making poetry have regularly been complex beyond analysis: love of the stuff and of rhythm, the need to invent, a passion for getting things right, the wish to leave one's language in better shape than one found it, a jealousy for the national honor, love for a person or for God, attachment to human possibility, pity, outletting agony or disappointment, exasperation, malice, hatred. Desire for fame and the entertaining of an audience are only two other motives, forgoable, particularly in the consciousness of a final two, which may be more central than any yet mentioned. Poetry is a terminal activity, taking place out near the end of things, where the poet's soul addresses one other soul only, never mind when. And it aims—never mind *either* communication or expression—at the reformation of the poet, as prayer does. In the grand cases—as, in our century, Yeats and Eliot—it enables the poet gradually, again and again, to become almost another man; but something of the sort happens, on a small scale, a freeing, with the creation of every real poem. We may feel sorry for the society, as we do for a man who has never been in love, but hardly for the poet. But let us avoid cant about poetic generations and war poets and other things we care nothing about.

Karl Shapiro is an easterner, who has written for a long time now, with success, in an individual variant of one main period style of the late 1930's and early 1940's. Prosaic, candid, awkwardly careful to be just to the feeling desired, he, more than some poets his superior, evokes constant sympathy. His oddly titled new book, however, *Poems of a Jew*, is not new but a collection of poems from his selected volume *Poems 1940–1953*, as well as some omitted from it, and a few new ones, gathered with reference to his title—a thing upon which his strange Introduction throws, for me, little light. "These poems are not for poets," he begins, ". . . not religious poems . . . they present



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. . . the states of mind which in my case led to the writing of poems. . . . Being a Jew is the consciousness of being a Jew," et cetera. This is not the first time that Mr. Shapiro's prose has seemed to me more self-contradictory and obscure than his verse, and I would commend to the reader, instead of his Introduction, Isidore Epstein's admirable little Pelican book, *Judaism*. The poems are another matter. Omitting some of Shapiro's tough, vivid early work, this book gives a less satisfactory over-all view than the 1953 volume; but there is much pleasure to be had from it, and now and then thematic illumination *is* cast on a familiar piece, such as "Travelogue for Exiles," which I confess I had never thought of as Jewish. The particular poems are regularly better than the general: "The First Time," for instance, is better than "The Synagogue" or "Israel," which should somehow have been better than its last stanza lets it be. Even the "Adam and Eve" suite, as he says himself in a note, is *not* symbolic. This contains his most open, finest work, I think, so far.

And for the third time, in the third way, Eve:
"The tree that rises from the middle part
Of the garden." And almost tenderly, "Thou art
The garden. *We*." Then she was overcome,
And Adam coldly, lest he should succumb
To pity, standing at the edge of doom,
Comforted her like one about to leave.

Surely this is remarkable, Dantesque; I have no feeling that his best work is yet written. One different point: the temptation to say beautiful things that may or may not be *true* seems hardly to have been experienced by this poet at all. It is something one would seldom recommend (Wallace Stevens is probably our most distinguished victim since Poe), but in so special and as it were muscle-bound a case. . .

Cummings and Dr. Williams are westerners, of course, versing briskly away in their mid-sixties and mid-seventies to everyone's delight, loaded with merited honors, impenitent, irregular, mannered. Mannerism, curiously, is a greater danger in western style than it is in eastern; it sticks out. What Cummings would do without parentheses is not easy to see. He makes use of them in all but seven of his ninety-five new poems, needs them in most, and some poems could not have been conceived without them: see *19*, *20*, *23*. They are the more obtrusive because he uses little other pointing—exception made for

s.ti:rst;hiso,nce;ma:n

which says "stirs this once man." What can the obsession with parentheses mean to Cummings? Simultaneity, no doubt, and inextricable relation, and offhandedness, informality. But I wonder whether they do not constitute also a sort of instinctive defense invoked by his talent against one of its worst faults, a hollow rhetoric of which *77* is the most embarrassing example in his new book. Along with his jerky, maze-like little poems has always gone an organ-like, Keatsian propensity, which has given him (and us) some of his stunning successes, but which he is quite right to distrust, for when the little poems fail they are only trivial, but when the others fail they are false.

Cummings is extremely sentimental, a fact long partly disguised by his satirical and tough-guy attitudes and still partly disguised by some of his language, but more patent throughout this book than ever before. I am not objecting, just reporting. The eternizing of which he has always been very fond—it is not done in Shakespeare's manner but it is eternizing all the same—is more frequently in evidence too. Otherwise the new book is as usual: love poems galore, moons, flowers, dreams, thrushes, miracles, vignettes on drunks and floozies, harridans, nice old ladies, businessmen, disquisitions on "why" and time. It is littered with the trademarks of his fine poems of the past, "little" and its allies, "un-," "almost," *x* "by" *y*. It should not be read in large chunks. The most effective poems, I think, are *13*, *16*, *76* and *95*, but there are amusing and touching passages in many others. Nothing, unless I am wrong, is up to the standard of his finest work, and the very loud poems are mostly bad. What is truly amazing is the scarcity of allusion to old age: *57*, *61*, a few others. It is a pity that one very dark poem, *30*, is not better. Cummings' high spirits are partly an act, natur-



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ally, one in which he has been engaged for so long that he must in some degree be taken in by it himself, and so some of his deepest feelings scarcely emerge.

*Paterson, Book Five* is a kind of ecstatic addendum to Dr. Williams' long poem. I wish everyone would read it. The Unicorn (in tapestries, which the old man, "I, Paterson, the King-self," goes to see—question of bus schedules for getting to the Cloisters) and the virgin, other women, satyrs, painters, flowers, letters from old friends (verbatim), the process of age, are the themes and materials—

(I have told you, this
is a fiction, pay attention).

Many rhythms remind one of Pound's in the later Cantos; well, who has a better right to them than Dr. Williams? The gaiety of this old man is adorable. Any reader will find passages for himself. My own favorite is two pages at the beginning of Section 2 (after a translation from Sappho and a page of economic junk that must be Pound) about a woman seen in the street whom he *certainly wishes he had spoken to!*

# Seeing and Thinking

THOM GUNN

*Seeing Is Believing.* By Charles Tomlinson. *McDowell, Obolensky. $3.00.*
*The Dark Houses.* By Donald Hall. *Viking. $3.00.*
*Mirrors & Windows: Poems.* By Howard Nemerov. *University of Chicago Press. $2.75.*

If one uses images at all, they are almost bound to be visual; for our other senses supply us with perceptions that are less clearly defined and less complex. The resources of the nose, for instance, are much sooner exhausted than those of the eye. This is sufficiently obvious, and since Pound's Dos and Don'ts we have been prepared to criticize sharply images that are not visually clear, not "realized." What Pound and the imagists obscured, however, is the fact that image-making has normally been merely a branch of poetic practice and not synonymous with the whole. The greatest poets, from Chaucer to Stevens, whether they have drawn copiously on the visual or not, have firmly subordinated it to a central *meaning.* But many of our critics blandly overlook the tradition that a poem should mean something, being under the impression that there is no connection between poetry and common sense. The whole business is brought up again by the very promising work of Charles Tomlinson. In a recent issue of *Poetry* Hugh Kenner gives him the highest possible praise on the grounds that, first, he is the only Englishman of talent to take account of the modern American tradition, and second, that he has a strongly developed visual sense. The first seems hardly a recommendation of Tomlinson's quality; rather it tells us something about him historically. But Mr. Kenner argues it with such urgency that I almost feel that if there had not been a Tomlinson, he would have had to invent one. The second claim demands a more extended discussion.

A few years ago Mr. Tomlinson published a book called *The Necklace,* which consisted largely of pastiche of Wallace Stevens. He was plainly conscious of what he was doing and did it with considerable skill. But having learned from the master how to use his eyes in a particular way, he was, after this book, faced with the prob-

✪ THOM GUNN, who was born in England, has been in this country since 1954. He received the Somerset Maugham Award for 1959, primarily in recognition of his second collection of poetry, *Sense of Movement,* which was published in April. Mr. Gunn is now teaching at the University of California, Berkeley.



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lem of any intelligent imagist: a poem has to mean something; an object however well described is still merely an object and therefore meaningless; and how is one to write about the visual in a rational way?

In his second book, *Seeing Is Believing*, he uses two different kinds of structure in an attempt to unite image with meaning, but neither provides a completely satisfactory answer. In "A Meditation on John Constable" he alternates lovely visual details with sometimes vague and sometimes questionable abstract statements: the former have the tone of Tomlinson, the latter that of the Stevens of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."

> He admired accidents, because governed by laws,
> Representing them (since the illusion was not his end)
> As governed by feeling. The end is our approval
> Freely accorded, the illusion persuading us
> That it exists as a human image. Caught
> By a wavering sun, or under a wind
> Which moistening among the outlines of banked foliage
> Prepares to dissolve them, it must grow constant;
> Though there, ruffling and parted, the disturbed
> Trees let through the distance, like white fog
> Into their broken ranks. It must persuade
> And with a constancy, not to be swept back
> To reveal what it half-conceals. Art is itself
> Once we accept it . . .

The trouble here is in the mixed quality of the writing. The image of the trees is vivid, well perceived, original and immediately persuasive. The generalizations are derivatively expressed and confusing in their meaning (the antecedents of the recurrent "it," for example, are extremely unclear). And I am not persuaded by such large statements: the relation between them and the detail is not as clear as it ought to be.

There is another possible method, used by the early Williams and the early Stevens, who often, instead of generalizing directly about the observed object or scene, suddenly introduce the observer near the end of the poem and *imply* generalizations from his reaction. Tomlinson does this in the first poem of the book, "The Atlantic," which would be very impressive if its ending were not modeled on that of "The Snow Man." And he also tries it, less successfully, in "Paring the Apple," which ends—

> The cool blade
> Severs between coolness, apple-rind
> Compelling a recognition.

But such a conclusion does not take us far enough: what *kind* of a recognition is it, after all, and what is being recognized? The visual clarity has been succeeded by an intellectual blur. In a curious way, Tomlinson's main virtue is associated with his main defect: he concentrates so much on seeing that he forgets to think. We may take comfort from the fact that the contrast between his first and second books shows he is already conscious of the defect.

Donald Hall at his best integrates image and its meaning in the very conception of the poem—even in the group of poems from *The Dark Houses* that most clearly takes the visual as a starting point, "Three Poems from Edvard Munch." Writing about pictures can be an evasion of the poet's proper duties, in that the picture presents him with something already organized, and he ought to be doing the organization for himself rather than working from somebody else's result. In the third of the poems, "The Kiss," perhaps Hall falls into the trap: he mistakes his observation of the picture for his observation of life; but in the other two something much more complicated is going on, something very far from an evasion. In "The Scream," for example, the transition from the picture to comment on the picture is skillfully done in the first eleven lines:

> Observe. Ridged, raised, tactile, the horror
> of the skinned head is there. It is skinned
> which had a covering-up before,
> and now is nude, and is determined
>
> by what it perceives. The blood not Christ's
> blood of death without resurrection,



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winds flatly in the air. Habit foists
conventional surrender to one

response in vision, but it fails here,
where the partaking viewer is freed
into the under-skin of his fear.

The transitions between concrete and abstract are managed with far less difficulty here than in Tomlinson's poem about Constable. The picture is realized in this poem, but so also is the man who watches it: they are to an extent identified—the "viewer is freed / into the under-skin of his fear" by seeing the "skinned head." The spectator, in fact, reacts to the picture as the man in the picture reacts to whatever *he* is experiencing. Such a structure cannot very well fail; and Hall does not treat the picture as a part of life already organized, but as an extreme form of disorganization.

The second poem, "Marat's Death," is probably the best of the three. The point of view is that of a (to use a fashionable word) persona—the poem is written in the wondering tone of someone seeing the picture for the first time. It has a complex structure: it seems at first to be merely a series of unrelated impressions, but it is actually a progression—not only in the spectator's mind, but also in the poet's interpretation of the motives of the characters in the painting. The condensation is possible because from the start the whole argument is made in terms of the imagery and could not exist apart from it. Near the beginning we read

Charlotte, the will begins to
revise you to leather.

And by the end the process is complete:

Charlotte
is stiffened with will, and she
will never move or make a sound.

It is a comment, *evoked* by the picture but not parasitic upon it, about the irrevocability of action: whatever one's motives, one is committed to an action in the very instant of performing it. To *do* is to kill the possibilities of alternative action, and Charlotte's assassination is thus both literal and metaphorical. Neither the visual sense nor the argument dominates in this poem, neither is subordinate, for each is conceived in terms of the other.

Howard Nemerov comes at the opposite extreme to Tomlinson. His style is easy and charming—sometimes, indeed, so charming that it is in danger of falling into a kind of glibness, especially in the lighter verse. His sense of humor is at its best in *Mirrors & Windows*, with the occasional unexpected aside in an otherwise serious poem. But the best poems here are those where he is in earnest throughout, the most remarkable of them being "The Murder of William Remington." To give a proper idea of the power of this poem, I have to quote at least three-quarters of it, the argument is so tightly connected. These are the second, third and last stanzas:

And yet there is the horror of the fact,
Though we knew not the man. To die in jail,
To be beaten to death, to know the act
Of personal fury before the eyes can fail
And the man die against the cold last wall
Of the lonely world—and neither is that all:

There is the terror too of each man's
thought,
That knows not, but must quietly suspect
His neighbor, friend, or self of being taught
To take an attitude merely correct;
Being frightened of his own cold image in
The glass of government, and his own sin,

Frightened lest senate house and prison wall
Be quarried of one stone, lest righteous and high
Look faintly smiling down and seem to call
A crime the welcome chance of liberty,
And any man an outlaw who aggrieves
The patriotism of a pair of thieves.

I have no doubt that this is an excellent poem. The fact of its existence gives the lie to the smart sneers about "*New Yorker* poets" and poets who teach: Mr. Nemerov contributes to the *New Yorker* and also teaches, but (or perhaps I should say "and") he has written a poem that is on an important subject without being pompous, says something about it without being didactic, generalizes without being vague,



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and is moving without being uncontrolled. Moreover—and this is relevant to the present context—it owes nothing to the imagist and post-imagist writer: its force is largely conceptual, and the kind of generalizations with which it deals simply leave no room for expanded detail. Such detail would only weaken the poem if it were present. What we do get is the kind of image ("lest senate house and prison wall / Be quarried of one stone") that firmly supports the central idea of the poem, an image that has an immediate impact without drawing attention to itself. The effect of the writing is far more complex than that of a simply visual impression: in the third and fourth of the lines I have quoted, for example, there is suggested—rather than a "picture," rather than an experience—a whole category of experience, in the evocation of which judgment is inevitably involved. Yet the judgment is not mere moralizing. One of the most powerful touches of the poem is in the phrase "before the eyes can fail"; it is unobtrusive in its place, yet it is horrifyingly vivid because it conveys to us the victim's consciousness *while* he is being beaten up. There is no need for a didactic comment.

And if we want to talk about tradition, we get a hint of the kind of tradition in which the poem is written from another of the few images—"the glass of government," which is used punningly in both the modern literal sense and in the Elizabethan abstract sense. This is, in fact, a poem in the tradition of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

My judgment of these poets is also a judgment of three kinds of writing, or of three attitudes to visual imagery. Tomlinson's poetry is frequently brilliant, but in short passages rather than in whole poems. The imagery dominates over the poems at the expense of the structure. There is nothing wrong, obviously, with visual images: they occur in most of the best poems in the language. But if they do occur, they should be *utilized*, as in "Marat's Death." It has been said that Tomlinson has a painter's eye. But Hall and Nemerov each have something more to the point, a poet's mind.



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# *The Reader Replies* . . . . . .

THE READER REPLIES *carries miscellaneous comments by readers and authors on various articles which have appeared in the magazine. All Communications should be addressed to: The Editor,* THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR, *1811 Q Street, N.W., Washington 9, D. C. Because of limitations of space, we cannot guarantee to print all letters received.*

—EDITOR

In his stimulating column in your Spring issue, Joseph Wood Krutch raises the question of whether Darwin was making "a conventional concession" when he spoke, in the last sentence of *The Origin of Species,* of the Creator breathing life "into a few forms or into one."

Darwin himself, it seems, admitted that he had made a concession. For in a letter written in 1863 to the English botanist, Sir J. D. Hooker, he stated: "I have long regretted that I truckled to public opinion and used the Pentateuchal term of creation, by which I meant 'appeared' by some wholly unknown process."

CORLISS LAMONT
Columbia University
New York, New York

* * *

For a change, I do mind Mr. Krutch's saying so. If, as he suggests in the Spring issue of THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR, he regrets that Darwin has been supported by over a century of study in paleontology and evolution and only slightly less in genetics, and would have us adhere to the voluble opinions of Dr. Johnson, I am interested in his opinion. It is worth something. Why try to hide behind fallacious arguments?

The first argument against the modern concept of evolution was that it is "curiously similar to a very primitive one," Eskimo cosmology. Since "dooneraks" are obviously like species struggling for existence, medicine men who control the spiritual world must be paralleled by biologists who control the organic world. Ergo, biologists are bad guys playing the role of God.

Then we learn that since the Newtonian hypotheses were "at last" modified, Darwinism, too, may prove to be insufficient in its present form. This is and always will be true of any scientific theory. But such skepticism has meaning only to the extent that it can be based on some cause for caution. In this case the basis is Mr. Krutch's own dislike for the evolutionary theory, Darwinian or Neo-Darwinian.

"If nature knows no purposes . . . and if, at the same time, man is himself a part of nature, then from whence come his concepts of purpose . . .?" This, it is implied, proves that the concept of purpose is transcendent. A confirmation of this syllogism might read: "If nature eats no ants, and if, at the same time, anteaters are a part of nature, then whence comes their ability to eat ants?"

S. DAVID WEBB
Berkeley, California

* * *

This reply "is about multiple-choice tests; it does not praise them." Neither does it approach them as if they were the stultifying nuisances that Professor Hoffmann's recent article in the Spring issue suggests that they may be. This reply asks, among other things, whether an intelligent and critical survey of the activities and the difficulties involved in higher education would be likely to reveal a malignancy so pat and so potent as the one Professor Hoffmann has tentatively identified. Could it not be that he is searching for the too-easy answer? If he is not, then it might be that those who have guided the testing movement through



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its half century of development are (were) malicious, incompetent, or both.

Even in the absence of Professor Hoffmann's remarks, it would be foolhardy to attempt a blanket defense of all "right answers" chosen and duly blessed by the myriad people, past and present, engaged in test construction. Professor Hoffmann has demonstrated that some items puzzle and disturb the "authorities." He may also have demonstrated that the "authorities" cannot consistently agree among themselves on answers to questions within their fields of competence. But has he demonstrated that valid items can be none but those on which "authorities" achieve unanimity?

Professor Hoffmann's proposed study would assess the authenticity and, presumably, the validity of current entrance testing practices, but his proposal stops short of the point at which it might yield constructive returns. He fails to recommend that alternative talent selection practices should be subjected to an appraisal as critical as the one which multiple-choice tests are to undergo. As a matter of fact, he fails to recommend that alternative practices should be appraised at all. One may ponder whether this step is omitted because Professor Hoffmann already knows a flawless (but unidentified) solution to the problems of selection, whether it is omitted because he would be pleased to see all attempts at talent selection abolished, or whether it is omitted because suggestable alternatives seem not to stand up too well under close examination.

In closing, and just for the fun of it, what is a talented, a gifted or a creative student, anyway?

N. M. Downie
Warren F. Seibert
Purdue University
Lafayette, Indiana

* * *

The criticisms of the multiple-choice examination presented by Banesh Hoffmann are cogent, logical and well-nigh irrefutable. The claim that his analysis, if supported by test experts, offers prima-facie evidence for

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the proposition that the College Board tests should be viewed with concern is questionable.

Even the subsequent assertion, reported elsewhere, that 5 per cent of the examination items are of doubtful validity, fails, it would seem, to justify the implied condemnation of this particular examination and of the multiple-choice type of examination.

Professor Hoffmann is simply documenting what every schoolman knows, that the perfectly valid examination has not yet been devised. If he can propose a type guaranteed to provide better than 95 per cent valid items, he will be performing a real service by offering it to the profession.

The same test-makers who slip in the construction of some multiple-choice items will surely slip as far in selection and/or grading of essay-type or other kinds of tests.

There is no intent to discourage the appointment by the scholarly organizations of a study committee, as Professor Hoffmann suggests. Such a committee might be very useful if it attacked serious problems not now seriously attacked by the College Board Examination Committee and other existing groups.

DONALD W. ROBINSON
San Francisco, California

* * *

Dr. Lukacs avows his good faith in the Spring issue of THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR, but his unsupported air of omniscience and his condescension impair his authority to speak and his credibility. If that isn't enough, Dr. Lukacs is dogmatic and ill-tempered.

It would help if the reader had information on how Dr. Lukacs knows that "we have refused to discuss German reunification on the basis of our original proposals that called for a free and neutral Germany"; or "that what the Russians are aiming for now is a neutral Germany and not a Sovietized Germany. . . ."

THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR ought to be able to do better than this on American foreign policy.

RALPH BLOCK
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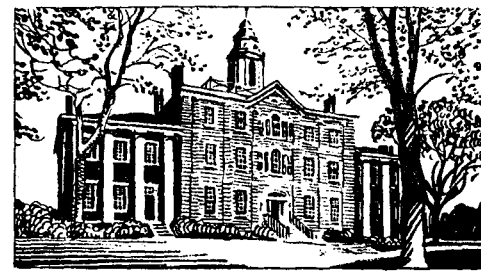

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Winter was dying; the campus dragged itself reluctantly out of February and into another March; life chugged along, in low gear. Suddenly all that changed as the Spring SCHOLAR came crashing in to recharge the intellectual atmosphere. Thank you for another fine issue, and most especially for J. A. Lukacs' lead article, "The American Imperial Disease." One may not agree completely with all of Mr. Lukacs' conclusions; but that does not detract from the pleasure of reading a message from a man who has something to say and is not afraid to say it, combining explosive force with literary artistry. It is in the current fashion to be so anxious to examine both sides of a question, to be so nonpartisan, (to attempt to please everyone?) that nobody can reach any conclusions at all. It is a relief to meet a man who can take a stand. Let us hear more from such men when you can.

C. STANLEY OGILVY
Hamilton College
Clinton, New York

One of the most disappointing aspects of Mr. Lukacs' analysis is his failure to acknowledge the *defensive* character of our so-called imperialism. What has America gained from setting up an elaborate network of foreign bases that is in any way comparable to the gains of past imperialists (including the very present Soviet species)? At most, we have achieved a modicum of global counterbalance to the territorially and populationwise imposing, if not overwhelming, Communist block. Admittedly, a balance of armed might is not a happy one; but what other course of action can be proposed, confronted as we are by an opponent whose unpredictable behavior (unpredictable because it lacks any sense of "Western Christian honor" or even of simple fair play) wreaks havoc with all traditions of diplomacy? Mr. Lukacs has nothing at all to offer except for an admonition to think about the "imperialist disease," as he calls it, and about what it does to "the body and soul" of America—but what are alternative solutions, and what will they do to America,



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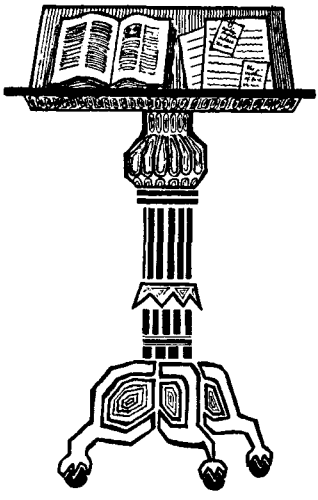

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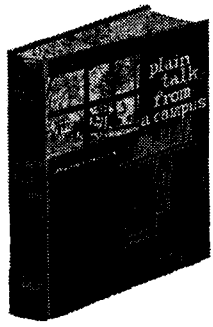


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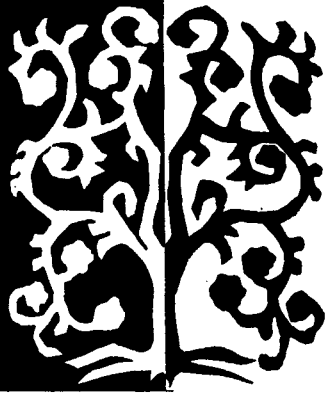

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or to Western Christianity for that matter? The political idealism of Wilson and Roosevelt resulted in the virtual enslavement of Eastern Europe and the unchecked development of a social system, the ultimate excesses of which we can now observe in China—how much more chastening can idealism stand before it turns justifiably into an attitude of broad cynicism?

I do not wish to consider each disheartening detail of Mr. Lukacs' analysis; his reference to "the dying ideology of communism" obviates the necessity for that. The conviction inspiring such a remark must be based on plainly unchastened idealism; one is tempted to call it wishful thinking at its most extreme. Surely, if we can find a man of Mr. Lukacs' historical awareness still indulging in it, it is no wonder that America's complacency and political shortsightedness remain the object of ridicule abroad!

LASZLO R. STRAKA
White Plains, New York

* * *

Your Spring issue presented a 4,000 word polemic by J. A. Lukacs condemning what he called "The American Imperial Disease." As you have asked that my first analysis of Lukacs be cut, I will here state conclusions rather than details.

If it is assumed that editors are usually as intelligent as their average readers, then the fact that you chose to publish such an ill-founded diatribe against American actions and motives (past and present) may indicate a danger that a number of readers will similarly fail to perceive the article's biased statement of "facts," its warped "judgment," and its utter lack of merit.

Lukacs accuses Americans of wishing "to become the Scoutmasters of the World" (a charge that has some merit), then accepts that feeble premise as "proof" that the United States is "an imperial garrison state" dominated by "a new sort of American *Realpolitik*, and atomic Machiavellianism custom-tailored to" the creation of "an American world empire involving five continents"—an utter *non sequitur*, not supported even by his distorted "facts."

While accusing the United States of em-



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pire building and utter hypocrisy, Lukacs blindly accepts Russian protestations of good and peaceful intentions, and twice says Russia has "already" shown a willingness "to retreat from those advanced positions that they held at the end of the last war." To Lukacs a rose and a skunk smell the same; and his kindest view of United States policy is to lump Russia and America together as not quite Publicans and Pharisees.

Such intellectual vacuity ill befits an associate professor of history—or the pages of THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR.

JAMES A. BLALOCK
Arlington, Virginia

* * *

I read with interest "The American Imperial Disease" by J. A. Lukacs.

The author gave examples to justify his contention that the sphere of American influence has been expanding, especially in the past sixty years. I can accept this contention, and with it the idea that we have been somewhat reluctant imperialists. The author also seems to feel that our imperial activities are destroying our national character. This is possible. I can agree that American attitudes are changing, but I'm not sure the change is entirely bad.

However, assume that it is. What should we do? What other course of action is preferable for our nation? Mr. Lukacs asks himself such a question. As I understand the last two pages of his article, his answer is that we should (1) talk about it, and (2) make Europe independent. The first part of this answer is no answer at all. The second part seems to be an extremely simple solution to such a complex problem as American "Globics."

In his discussion, Mr. Lukacs defines politics as a concern with one's own community, and opposes politics to globics, the activity of American statesmen. But doesn't this concern cover the economic and political welfare of one's community (nation) in the long run? And doesn't such concern often impel a nation to take such steps as we are taking to protect its total welfare? Are America's primary concerns any less national because her activities are global? What important nation in history has not meddled in the affairs of other nations to protect its own interests?

Does Mr. Lukacs believe that economic collapse would be better for America than the "imperial disease" of which he speaks? He frankly admits that our imperial activities contribute much to our prosperity. He suggests that there are dangers in trying to be "Scoutmasters of the World." Are there not even greater dangers in a renunciation of world leadership?

DONALD V. ETZ
Dayton, Ohio



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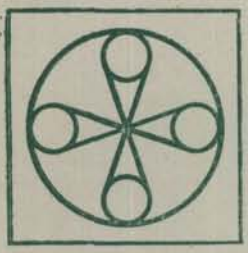

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